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Evil and the Ontological Disproof

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EVIL AND THE ONTOLOGICAL DISPROOF

by

CARL BROWNSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Philosophy in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty
in Philosophy in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Evil and the Ontological Disproof

by

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Advisor: Stephen Grover

This dissertation is a revival of the *ontological disproof*, an ontological argument against the existence of God. The ontological disproof, in its original form, argues that God is impossible, because if God exists, he must exist necessarily, and necessary existence is impossible. The notion of necessary existence has been largely rehabilitated since this argument was first offered in 1948, and the argument has accordingly lost much of its force. I argue that the ontological disproof ought to be combined with the problem of evil, and that the resulting synthesis of the two arguments is far more powerful than either element could be alone. The argument is this: if God exists, then he exists necessarily. This necessary existence entails that the mere possibility of a state of affairs incompatible with God's essential qualities, his perfect goodness and omnipotence, renders God impossible. The possibility of evil incompatible with God does exactly that. This simple argument has remarkable range: it serves as an ontological argument against the existence of God, but it can also serve as a new form of the problem of evil, allowing the resolution of that problem to rest on the mere possibility of evil incompatible with God. It can also

serve as a contingency argument against the existence of God: God must be a necessary being to adequately explain the existence of the contingent world, but cannot be. This one argument, which I call the *ontological problem of evil*, can thus play several roles in the philosophy of religion, and can demonstrate the metaphysical impossibility of God from several directions simultaneously.

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1. Evil and Necessity

“[The problem of evil] seems to result from two distinguishable functions that the idea of God has. It is an ultimate source of explanations of why things are as they are; it is also the embodiment of the very standard by which many of them are found wanting.”¹

The problem of evil raises questions about the existence and nature of God, but what exactly are those questions? Is the problem of evil a logical problem,² or merely an evidential problem,³ or even just a “noncrucial perplexity of relatively minor importance”?⁴ Are only the goodness and omnipotence of God at stake,⁵ or are further attributes of God brought into doubt by evil as well? Omniscience is surely relevant to the problem of evil, and perhaps more qualities still – maybe a thicker concept like justice in place of goodness,⁶ or wisdom in place of omniscience, would make the problem more pointed. I think that amidst this ambiguity in the framing of the problem, an essential attribute of God has been neglected, one which changes the character of the problem and renders it decisive. I want to investigate what the problem of evil means for the necessary existence of God.

The problem of evil raises serious difficulties for the notion that God exists necessarily. If there is a metaphysically possible state of affairs incompatible with

¹ Penelhum, T. “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil.” *Religious Studies* 2 (1966): 95-107.

² Mackie, J.L. “Evil and Omnipotence.” *Mind* (64): 200-212, 195.

³ Rowe, W. “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* (16). 1979.

⁴ Pike, N. “Hume on Evil.” In Adams, R. and Adams, M. *The Problem of Evil*. OUP 1990: p. 52.

⁵ Mackie, p. 200.

⁶ Kant, I. “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy,” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Wood, A. and di Giovanni, G. CUP. 2001

God's perfections, then God is not a necessary being. Necessity, however, is part of the very idea of God, an essential attribute, just as omnipotence and goodness are. If the problem of evil entails that God is not necessary, it thereby entails that God does not exist. But evil incompatible with God *is* possible. This simple problem amounts to a disproof of the existence of God from several directions at once – an ontological disproof, a cosmological disproof, a stronger version of the logical problem of evil.

Terence Penelhum, above, does not address necessity in his account of the problem of evil, but his framework points towards the role necessity plays: the problem of evil involves the necessity of God, because necessity is an essential part of how God can be an "ultimate source of explanations of why things are as they are." Explaining why things are as they are in a moral sense is the point of theodicy; explaining why things are as they are in a metaphysical sense is the point of the cosmological argument. These two kinds of explanation are, I believe, in tension, as some of the ways things could be are incompatible with the existence of God. But both sorts of explanations *must* come together if God is to exist in any meaningful way. The problem of evil arises precisely because God is supposed to serve as an explanation of why the world is this way, and evil is part of the world, so it must be a part of that explanation.

Modal questions arise in both the problem of evil and the cosmological argument. Thinking through the problem of evil involves counterfactuals, comparisons of this world with alternatives, a sense that things could have been better or worse: why do children get cancer, when they might not have? Why are things not better, if God is in charge? The problem of evil is both moral and modal.

The cosmological argument is modal as well: God must exist necessarily rather than contingently because he must serve as an explanation of why things are as they are *and not another way*. His existence, his sovereignty, his power and his freedom must therefore range over those other ways things could be. This modal overlap between the two problems means that the cosmological argument and the problem of evil can and should be contested on the same field.

At that intersection of the necessity of God and the problem of evil lies the following problem:

1. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.
2. If God exists necessarily, then nothing incompatible with God's existence is metaphysically possible.
3. Evil incompatible with the existence of God is metaphysically possible.

Therefore, God does not exist.

It will be easier if this argument has a name, so I will call it the *ontological problem of evil*, to reflect its role as a synthesis of two other problems: the so-called ontological disproof, and the problem of evil.

The first premise claims that necessary existence is essential to God, an attribute without which nothing could be God. An essential attribute is one without which a thing could not exist, so if God's nonexistence is possible, God is impossible. The second premise connects the necessary existence of God to the rest of all possibility: the necessity of God means that there must be no possible state of affairs incompatible with God's existence. But the problem of evil includes exactly this kind of possibility. If evil incompatible with God's essential qualities, with God's goodness

and omnipotence, is metaphysically possible, then God is impossible. This fact changes the structure of the problem of evil in a fundamental way. The problem of evil need not be about whether evil incompatible with God actually exists: the mere possibility of it is enough to mean that God is impossible.

If it seems as though that could not be so, that no mere possibility could entail the nonexistence of God, then I suspect that the scope and the strangeness of necessity are being underestimated. The easiest way to express the problem is in possible-worlds language. There are other ways to explain necessary existence, and the problem can be reformulated in other way, but as a matter of consistency and clarity, and so that the problem can be described within the same philosophical space laid out by, say, Alvin Plantinga's modal defense and ontological argument, I will usually put the problem in those terms. If necessity has anything to do with possibility, then any other account of the problem will face the same troubles. The problem, then, can be put this way: if God exists, then he exists necessarily, which means that he exists in every possible world.⁷ But if God exists in every possible world, then no possible world can contain any evil incompatible with the existence or, what amounts to the same thing, the essential qualities of God. The problem of evil generates a *reductio* of this entailment: evil incompatible with God is possible anyway. The necessity of God is a metaphysical overreach: perhaps there are

⁷ It is a peculiar phrase to say that God exists "in" a world, but a useful one. When I say that God exists in a world, I only mean to refer to conditions in which both God and that world exist. I do not mean to say any more – that he is, say, contained by or bound by that world.

necessary beings, but a necessary *perfect* being, essentially omnipotent and good, is inconsistent with the range of possibility.

Somewhere in the infinite modal and moral scope of possibility, there is surely something too terrible to reconcile with God's perfections. Is there a worst of all possible worlds? Is even *it* incompatible with the goodness of God? If there is no worst possible world, and there is instead an infinite chain of worse and worse worlds, then are there not possibilities incompatible with God's goodness *somewhere* down that chain? Both answers are bad. In either scenario, if there is any metaphysically possible state of affairs incompatible with God's essential goodness and power, then God does not exist. But surely there are a great many such possibilities that we ought not to call perfectly good; it would wreck our moral structure to deny it.

The ontological problem of evil is thus very different from other versions of the problem, and the normal resources of theodicy seem inadequate to even address the problem, for they apply to one world at a time, or to sets of similar worlds. But the range of metaphysical possibility is enormous. One might look pessimistically at the actual world and think that it really couldn't get much worse. I think that things could get much, much worse. One might look at it instead optimistically, like Leibniz, and see the best of all possible worlds. I do not share that optimism either: I think that things could get much, much better. But either way, the place of the actual world in the scope of possibility plays no role in this problem, for it is God's *necessity* at stake, not his contingent goodness. Even if Leibniz were right and this was the best of all possible worlds, the ontological problem would, perhaps strangely, be

totally unaffected. The ontological problem of evil is not merely a challenge to God's *actual* goodness, omnipotence, and the like. It is a challenge to the idea that God is a necessary being, perfect across all possible worlds, the independent being on which the contingent world depends, who possesses his qualities essentially and thus is perfect in all possible worlds. The problem of evil thus does not depend merely on how things actually are, but on how things could be. The ontological problem of evil suggests that we change our focus from the provinciality of this world to the whole scope of metaphysical possibility: if there is a God, his existence must be consistent with *all* of it. Surely it is not.

Part of the problem is a tension between God's necessary existence and God's essential goodness. God's necessity means that God must be the ultimate source of explanations of why the world is as it is; God's goodness means that God is also supposed to be, as Penelhum says, "the standard by which this world is found wanting." These two demands are incompatible. If God *exists* necessarily, then he exists in all possible worlds, including the unjustifiably evil ones, those incompatible with perfect goodness. If God's *goodness* is necessary, if goodness is essential to him, then he cannot exist in those worlds. He therefore both *must* and *cannot* exist in all possible worlds.

Imagine Leibniz's God looking at all possible worlds, and refusing all but the best one. The other worlds are refused not for no reason at all, but because they are flawed, and so are *incompatible with God's perfections*. If they are incompatible with God's perfections, then there are possibilities incompatible with essential qualities of God. God is therefore not necessary, and God therefore does not exist. In this

form, the problem arises from Leibniz's particular demand that God must choose the best of all possible worlds, but the problem arises in analogous ways if God's goodness means anything at all. If there is *anything* that God's goodness would lead him to reject, if God's goodness is incompatible with anything at all, or precludes any possibility, then we have the same result: there are possible worlds incompatible with God's nature.

So, God's necessity and goodness together entail that God both must and cannot exist in all possible worlds. He must if he is to be the metaphysical explanation of why things are as they are; he cannot if he is also to be an appropriate standard of moral perfection. The metaphysical and the moral functions of God are thus irreconcilable.

This is the problem I want to explore. The problem cuts across many different philosophical domains – the problem of evil, the metaphysics of possibility, the ontological argument, the contingency argument. To give some focus to that range, I will start historically, with two problems that I believe the ontological problem of evil solves decisively: J.N. Findlay's ontological disproof of the existence of God, and J.L. Mackie's logical problem of evil. These arguments appeared in the same post-WWII philosophical environment. Findlay's paper appeared in 1948;⁸ the basic responses that would defuse the problem had appeared by 1949,⁹ and by 1960

⁸ Findlay, J.N. "Can God's Existence Be Disproven?" *Mind* (57): 176-183. 1948.

⁹ See the responses from A.C.A Rainier and George Hughes in the next chapter.

Findlay's paper had been largely defeated.¹⁰ Mackie's paper appeared in 1955;¹¹ the rudiments of the 'defense' that would defuse it had appeared by 1963.¹² Two intriguing arguments for the impossibility of God, arising roughly in parallel, both dead by the 1960's; they could have intersected, but they did not. The first chapters of this work will explore how those arguments can be resurrected in a new form, whereby the ontological disproof and the logical problem of evil mutually reinforce one another, each bringing its concerns to bear on the other, evil into the ontological disproof and necessity into the problem of evil. The synthesis of those two old arguments is the argument of this work.

J.N. Findlay argues that God is impossible, because necessary existence is essential to God, and because necessary existence is nevertheless metaphysically impossible. If both premises are true, then God is impossible. This argument became known as the ontological disproof. J.L. Mackie argues that there is a contradiction in theism, in that God's goodness and omnipotence are logically incompatible with the existence of evil. And so, if evil exists,¹³ then an essential quality of God is lost, and God is impossible. This is the logical problem of evil. Findlay's argument does not address the problem of evil, and Mackie's argument does not address the question of God's necessity.

¹⁰ Hick, J. "God as Necessary Being." *The Journal of Philosophy* (57): 725-734. 1960. Several attacks on Findlay's argument appeared immediately, but Hick's was probably the last major assault.

¹¹ Mackie, J.L. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* (64): 200-212. 1955.

¹² Pike, N. "Hume on Evil." *Philosophical Review* (72): 180-97. 1963. Alvin Plantinga's later attack is more famous, but the philosophical damage was already done here.

¹³ One could deny that evil exists, but Mackie thinks that belief in evil is essential to theism. If, at any rate, one *does* believe that evil exists, Mackie argues that it follows that an essential quality of God must be lost.

The ontological problem of evil combines them, removing the weaker premise of each argument and replacing it with the stronger premise of the other. God's necessary existence is impossible, not because necessary existence is impossible generally, as Findlay argued, but because the problem of evil renders the necessity of God in particular impossible. Likewise, evil is incompatible with the essential qualities of God, not, as Mackie argued, because evil is incompatible with omnipotence and goodness alone, but because the scope of *possibility* in evil precludes the possibility that God exhibit those perfections necessarily. The conjunction of the two arguments is far stronger than either is alone.

Findlay's argument that God's necessity is impossible is therefore strengthened by consideration of the problem of evil, because the problem of evil offers particular possibilities that would preclude that necessity. Mackie's argument that evil is incompatible with the attributes of God is strengthened by adding necessary existence to the list of the attributes at stake in the problem of evil: an omnipotent, perfectly good, contingent being might (epistemically) be compatible with the existence of evil, or at least of some kinds of evil, but surely not with *all possible* evil.

There are really only two moves by which one can evade the conclusion of this argument: deny the necessity of God, or deny the possibility of evil incompatible with God. The former is not a live option for a theist, though one might well try to recharacterize necessity. There are a great many directions from which the theist might approach the problem: via the nature of metaphysical possibility and necessity, the nature of evil, theodicy. But ultimately, a denial of the conclusion of

this argument will mean asserting the contingency of God's existence, or it will mean asserting that every possible evil is compatible with the existence of God. It is hard to see either of these as a realistic escape route: God cannot be contingent, and evil incompatible with God *is* possible.

So the ontological problem of evil offers a new, compelling reason to think that God is impossible. The problem of evil means that God cannot be a necessary being after all. Necessity, in turn, is not a trivial feature of God: without it, God cannot be the ultimate explanation of why the world is as it is, so if God is not necessary, God does not exist. These two simple premises are, in one simple problem, a new version of the ontological disproof and a new version of the problem of evil. In what follows I'll argue in detail that the ontological problem of evil is a more forceful version of each of those problems, and that it does mean that God is impossible.

2. From Findlay to Mackie

J.N. Findlay's "Can God's Existence Be Disproven?"¹⁴ appeared in the journal *Mind* in 1948, in the same philosophical environment that gave us J.L. Mackie's logical problem in 1955.¹⁵ Findlay offered an argument that God is impossible that came to be called the 'ontological disproof'. It consists of two premises that are relatively innocuous when considered independently, but reveal a striking problem when combined:

4. Necessary existence is essential to God.

5. Necessary existence is impossible.

The first premise looks obvious if you focus on the demands of philosophical theology and ignore the influence of Hume, Kant, and the logical positivists. The second looks obvious if you focus on the latter and ignore the former. Findlay put them together. If *both* are true, then God is impossible.

The first premise rests on the requirement that God be worthy of worship, which leads Findlay to divine necessity because:

[T]he worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely *happens* to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely *happen* to depend. The true object of religious reverence must not be one, merely, to which no *actual* realities stand opposed: it must be one to which such opposition is totally inconceivable.¹⁶

No contingent being could meet that criterion.

Hence the name 'ontological disproof': Findlay argues that the necessity of God makes God impossible. The 'ontological' in that name makes it sound as though

¹⁴ Findlay, J.N. "Can God's Existence Be Disproven?" *Mind* (57): 176-183. 1948.

¹⁵ Mackie, J.L. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind* (64): 200-212. 1955.

¹⁶ Findlay, p. 180.

the necessity that gives rise to the problem springs from the very definition of God, as in the ontological arguments of Anselm and Descartes. But his concerns in the passage above are at least as *cosmological* as ontological: any being worthy-of-worship must be a necessary being for Findlay at least in part because if it were not, it could not be true that all of contingent existence depended on God. The ontological disproof is thus also a cosmological disproof. The two need not be mutually exclusive: necessity could be part of the very meaning of the word God, and that could be so because of cosmological demands. Still, the ontological and cosmological arguments raise very different sorts of problems, so we should notice that this ontological disproof need not be all that ‘ontological’, in the Anselmian-Cartesian-Kantian sense.

Findlay approaches the question as a matter of *idolatry*, as a matter of what it would be appropriate and inappropriate to worship.

[I]t is possible to say that there are nearly as many “Gods” as there are speakers and worshippers. We shall, however, choose an indirect approach and pin God down for our purposes as the “adequate object of religious attitudes.”¹⁷

But what exactly would make an object of religious attitudes “adequate”?

[W]e can consider the circumstances in which ordinary speakers would call an attitude “appropriate” or “justified”. ... Plainly we shall be following the natural trends of unreflective speech if we say that religious attitudes presume *superiority* in their objects, and such superiority, moreover, as reduces us, who feel the attitudes, to comparative nothingness.¹⁸

¹⁷ Findlay, p. 178.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Could a being that existed accidentally, that did not carry within itself the ground of its own existence, meet those criteria? Could a contingent being fulfil the functions of God?

Religious attitudes properly “presume superiority” in their objects; a religious object should properly make us “bend the knee” before it. For Findlay, this means that God must be necessary. A contingent being might merit the *douleia* appropriate to the many things we venerate and respect enough deem holy, but the *latreia* due only to God requires that God be a necessary being on which all of the rest of existence depends.¹⁹ A contingent being, no matter how great and powerful, would merely be another dependent being, and would therefore lack the requisite sacred qualities of God. It would be *idolatrous* to worship it.

We can't help feeling that the worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely *happens* to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely *happen* to depend.²⁰

God's existence must therefore be necessary, and the existence of the contingent world must depend on God.

Findlay goes on:

God mustn't merely cover the territory of the actual, but also, with equal comprehensiveness, the territory of the possible. And not only must the existence of *other* things be unthinkable without him, but his own non-existence must be wholly unthinkable.²¹

¹⁹ *Douleia* (from the Greek *doule*, slave or servant), refers to the special, lesser kind of veneration which in Catholic doctrine is due to the saints, as opposed to the *latreia* (from *latr*, servant, but also worshipper) that is due only to God. *Idolatry* comes from *latreia*; the special wrong of idolatry is that *latreia* is given to something less than God. Worship of a contingent being is, in Findlay's view, idolatrous.

²⁰ Findlay, p. 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The last sentence makes this argument look “ontological” in the sense of Anselm’s argument in Chapter IV of the *Proslogion*, when Anselm argued that the nonexistence of God was unthinkable in anything but words; one could never think of the non-existence of God himself.²² Findlay will argue the other way around: there could be no being whose nonexistence is “unthinkable”, whether *de dicto* or *de re*, but God’s nonexistence nevertheless must meet that condition.

The necessity of God involves more than God’s necessary *existence*: God’s qualities must be essential, and the rest of reality must depend on God. For the ontological problem of evil, the essential qualities of God contribute acutely to the problem, for it is not the mere existence of a necessary being that is impossible, but the existence of a necessarily *perfect* being. Those qualities were part of the original ontological disproof:

It would be quite unsatisfactory from the religious standpoint if an object merely happened to be wise, good, powerful, and so forth, even to a superlative degree. For though such qualities might be intimately characteristic of the Supreme Being, they wouldn’t be in any sense inalienably his own. Again we are led on to a queer and barely intelligible scholastic doctrine, that God isn’t merely good, but is in some manner indistinguishable from his own (and anyone else’s) goodness.²³

If God possesses his qualities merely accidentally, if those qualities are not grounded in his own nature, then his possession of them is not fully sovereign. God must not only exist necessarily, but he must also be the metaphysical ground of all of his essential properties. To put the matter, somewhat anachronistically, in possible-

²² St. Anselm, in *Proslogion IV*, writes: “A thing may be conceived in two ways: (1) when the word signifying it is conceived; (2) when the thing itself is understood. As far as the word goes, God can be conceived not to exist; in reality he cannot.”

²³ Findlay, p. 181.

worlds terms, he must not only exist in every possible world, but be perfectly good, omnipotent and omniscient in all of them. His existence is necessary, and his qualities are essential.

It is this latter concern – not just the impossibility of necessary existence, but the notion that God exists necessarily *and* possesses his perfect qualities essentially – that is the source of the ontological problem of evil. Are the features of worlds relevant to whether God would be good if he created them? I think that they *obviously* are. The facts of the world ought to matter immensely in our judgment of whether God is good. Could God really be good no matter what happened in the world? If he is a necessary being, then he must be, but cannot be.

At any rate, Findlay believed that necessary existence is essential to the concept of God, as without it, worship of God would be inappropriate. This is Findlay's argument for the essentiality of necessary existence. This was not the controversial premise; one might explain the need for necessary existence in God differently than Findlay did, but once cannot be an orthodox theist and think that God is a contingent being. The second premise proved more controversial.

Findlay offers it in more than one way: necessary existence is either impossible, or meaningless:

What, however, are the consequences of these requirements upon the possibility of God's existence? Plainly (for all who share a contemporary outlook), they entail not only that there isn't a God, but that the Divine Existence is either senseless or impossible.²⁴

²⁴ Findlay, p. 182.

“Senseless” and “impossible” are different claims, though, like the ontological and cosmological accounts of the necessity of God, they might come together. For

impossible, he gestures to Kant:

Those who believe in necessary truths which aren't merely tautological, think that such truths merely connect the *possible* instances of various characteristics with each other: they don't expect such truths to tell them whether there *will* be instances of any characteristics. This is the outcome of the whole medieval and Kantian criticism of the Ontological Proof.²⁵

For “senseless”, Findlay points to the then-current authority of logical positivism:

[O]n a yet more modern view of the matter, necessity in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of our language. On such a view the Divine Existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically *whatever the empirical circumstances might turn out to be*.²⁶

Impossible and meaningless are very different conclusions. If the conclusion is that the concept of God is meaningless, then it is a conclusion that one could imagine Wittgenstein or Meister Eckhart accepting wholeheartedly, with no harm done to their belief in God. Findlay offers both “senseless” and “impossible,” and to the logical positivist they might as well be interchangeable, but from our retrospective vantage point, however, it is clearly ‘impossible’ that is the bigger threat.

Findlay’s account of the Kantian objection to necessary existence is that necessity merely connects possible qualities with each other; it cannot tell us whether those qualities will be instantiated in something that actually *exists*. Existence, after all, is not a real predicate. Perhaps Kant did not really think that necessary existence is impossible, given the transcendental deduction and the

²⁵ Findlay, p. 182.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

synthetic a priori, but clearly Findlay *thought* that it did (and he was surely not alone):

This [i.e., the impossibility of necessary existence] is the outcome of the whole medieval and Kantian criticism of the ontological proof.²⁷

Despite the fact that the verificationist picture was more “modern” (in 1948) than the Kantian, Findlay prefers the Kantian – God is *impossible*, rather than meaningless. Meaninglessness is a lesser threat: the concept of God might be meaningless to us, just because it infinitely transcends our ability to conceive it, while God nevertheless exists all the same, meaninglessly. If God is impossible, however, that is the end of the game.

There are issues here for Findlay. He may or may not be interpreting Kant correctly; he may or may not have the right account of what logical positivism meant for necessary existence. His equivocation between two different accounts of what his conclusion is supposed to be is less than ideal. But it is undeniable that the tide was against the notion of necessary existence in the late 1940’s. There are multiple lines of argument here for generally similar conclusions about necessary existence, and while they may or may not conflict in various ways about how exactly to explain the problem with necessary existence, the consensus at the time was that there was *some* problem with it.

The notion that necessary existence is impossible is still a good starting point for an argument against the existence of God now, almost seventy years after Findlay’s paper was written, even admitting the host of changes in the state of our

²⁷ Findlay, p. 182.

understanding of modal metaphysics that have developed in that time. Findlay's argument was surely *more* plausible in 1948, but the denial of necessary existence is still a respectable philosophical position, the consequences of which still mean today what they meant then for the existence of God.²⁸ The ontological disproof, stripped of its context and trappings, consists of two simple premises that are still live philosophical options: necessary existence is an essential element of the concept of God, and necessary existence is impossible. The argument could still be defended on roughly its own terms.

What happened in the interim? The name "ontological disproof" was attached to it by a critic, George Hughes, in the next issue of *Mind*:

"I think it is safe to proclaim the failure of what I cannot resist calling Professor Findlay's Ontological Disproof of God's existence. By an 'Ontological Disproof', I mean an argument from the analysis of a concept to non-existence, just as the 'Ontological Proof' is an argument from the analysis of a concept to existence."²⁹

Findlay did not give it a name; it might, again, just as well be called a *cosmological* disproof. Hughes's definition of 'ontological disproof' is broad, though – broad enough to contain within it a variety of forms, just as there is a variety of ontological arguments *for* the existence of God. And this certainly is an argument from the analysis of a concept – God is necessary – to God's nonexistence. The name 'ontological disproof' fits fine.

²⁸ See, e.g. Hintikka, J. 1970, "The Semantics of Modal Notions and the Indeterminacy of Ontology", *Synthese* 21: 408-424, for an interesting set of problems with transworld identity that postdates Findlay's paper that might underlie a contemporary ontological disproof.

²⁹ Hughes, G. "Has God's Existence Been Disproved?" *Mind* (58): 72. 1949.

It is surprising that no one had put this argument forward before Findlay; Hume or Kant ought to have seen it. The idea that necessary existence is impossible has been around wreaking havoc since at least Hume, but no one until Findlay seemed to see this as a problem for the *existence* of God.³⁰ Hume and Kant apparently meant their critiques of necessary existence only to be objections to various *arguments* for the existence of God. The impact of the idea that necessary existence is impossible was thus contained. It served only as a tool for criticizing bad philosophical arguments for the existence of God. Its potential power to serve as an argument against the very possibility of God apparently escaped notice. Hume never gives an ontological disproof; his attack on necessary existence is meant only to defuse Demea's contingency argument.³¹ Kant argues for the impossibility of logically necessary existence to defuse the ontological and cosmological arguments, but not to argue against the very possibility of God.³² But this situation is untenable: if necessary existence *is* impossible, then an essential part of the idea of God has been lost.

Findlay does not take it upon himself to fully defend the impossibility of necessary existence; he merely draws out the natural consequence of others' critiques of the notion. It is perfectly fair for him not to reinvent the wheel on this

³⁰ Wittgenstein clearly gave a similar argument against the *meaning* of the word God. See *Tractatus* 6.432: "How the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world." (Routledge 2001)

³¹ Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hackett. 1998. See Part IX.

³² The fact that existence is not a predicate means that *logically* necessary existence is impossible for Kant. Like Findlay's critics, however, he may well have thought that God nevertheless had a non-logical necessity. Kant after all believed in our a priori access to a synthetic realm of metaphysical necessities (e.g., mathematics), whether God is part of that realm or not.

matter: other sources had given good, trenchant arguments against necessary existence, but had apparently failed to notice that if those arguments were right, they entailed more than that certain arguments for the existence of God don't work: if right, they entail that God is impossible. Findlay's contribution is to notice this entailment.

Findlay interprets his own argument in a curious way. It is a curious argument, after all, removed a few steps from the usual objections to the existence of God, and it demands interpretation. Findlay claims that the necessity of God entails that truths about God can never "make a real difference." The demand that God be necessary means that truths about God can only reflect an arbitrary convention of language, such that they would be maintained no matter what the actual world was like:

On such a view, the divine existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically *whatever the empirical circumstances turn out to be*.³³

This consequence of God's necessary existence makes God a very different concept than other supposed necessary beings, like mathematical entities: God is supposed to be relevant to the empirical world in a way that no other purported necessary being is:³⁴ God is the sovereign creator of heaven and earth, the ultimate explanation of why things are as they are. But if God is a necessary being, then he

³³ Findlay, p. 182.

³⁴ There may be ways in which other necessities are relevant to the empirical world: mathematics might explain why you can't divide an odd number of sheep into two equal pens, etc. But the way in which God is supposed to be relevant to the explanation of the empirical world is surely unique amongst the various supposedly necessary beings.

would exist no matter what the world was like. These two claims are in tension: how could God's nature be the explanation of why the world is like this, when God's nature is equally consistent with every possible world? What qualities in could have led to the creation of *this* world, when those qualities are consistent with every other possible world as well? How could the goodness of God be preserved "whatever the empirical circumstances turn out to be"?

The ontological problem of evil is precisely the question of whether it makes sense "to speak theistically whatever the empirical circumstances turn out to be," in the context of the problem of evil. How could it make sense to speak theistically *no matter what evil* occurs? How could God exist in every possible world, no matter what happens in those worlds, and no matter how evil they become? Findlay brushes up against these questions, but only in the sense that he wonders whether God can be both relevant and necessary. The circumstances of the world can make no difference to the existence of a necessary God, so God is irrelevant to the empirical world. So far, this might be strange, but not impossible: God exists no matter what happens in the world, just as the laws of mathematics apply no matter what happens in the world. The problem of evil, I think, is what turns the story from strange to impossible. The *moral* details of what is going on in those possible worlds, together with the realization that God's perfections are essential qualities, mean that the necessary existence of God is not at all like the laws of mathematics. The details of a world can preclude the existence of God.

We'll return to the difference the problem of evil makes in a moment; first we must see what happened to Findlay's version of the argument. In Findlay's terms, the ontological disproof is simply this:

4. Necessary existence is essential to God.

5. Necessary existence is impossible.

Therefore, God does not exist.

There are again two ways of understanding the necessity of God:

(a) The ontological conception, in which necessity lies in the very concept of God.

(b) The cosmological conception, in which necessity lies in God's capacity to explain the universe and all of existence.

These two conceptions of necessity map onto two pathways critics of the argument took to rescue divine necessity from Findlay's assault. Some critics tried to defend God's logical or ontological necessity. Others argued instead that God's necessity was never supposed to be logical, but was instead metaphysical, or cosmological.³⁵ Either way, the goal was the same – God's necessity must be explained and salvaged, for a contingent God, the respondents agreed, was impossible. None of the public responses to Findlay argued that necessary existence is not essential to God after all. They differ only in how to explain what necessary existence means.

George Hughes, responding to Findlay in the next issue of *Mind*, falls into the ontological category: he tries to rescue God's logical necessity. He suggests that if

³⁵ By 'cosmological necessity', I mean the particular sort of metaphysically necessary existence that could function in a cosmological argument, rather than in an ontological argument: independent existence, *aseity*, etc.

necessity is a notion that is properly restricted to propositions, then that restriction can be met by replacing talk of God's necessary *existence* with the claim that the proposition 'God exists' is necessarily *true*. Necessity then is restricted to a proposition, but an existential one. Here we have the Kantian problem: aren't all existential propositions contingent? Hughes suggests that the idea that all existential propositions are contingent ought to be restricted to *empirical* existential propositions:

[I]t does not in the slightest follow from the view that all empirical propositions are contingent that there may not be some other class of existential propositions which are not to be given such an analysis. Now those who maintain that "God exists" is a necessary proposition usually hold that it is the *only* necessary existential proposition.³⁶

The fact that all empirical propositions are contingent, Hughes argues, actually reinforces the need for the existence of God: this is the ground of the contingency argument. The contingency argument owes its basic plausibility to the claim that God's existence is the *only* necessary existential proposition. The fact that all other existential propositions are contingent leaves them in need of explanation, and thus in need of the necessary being. The fact that all *other* empirical propositions are contingent is thus the starting point for that version of the cosmological argument – the contingency argument. Far from being a problem for the existence of God, the fact that all empirical propositions are contingent is the beginning of an argument *for* the existence of God.

A.C.A. Rainier, in the same issue of *Mind*, takes a different approach. He allows that God's existence is not logically necessary, but maintains that it was never

³⁶ Hughes, G. "Has God's Existence Been Disproven?" *Mind* (58): p. 69. 1949.

meant to be logically necessary: God's necessity is metaphysical, rather than logical.

Necessary existence, for Rainier, is:

“... complete actuality, indestructibility, *aseitas* or independence of limiting conditions.”³⁷

God's necessity consists in those attributes that allow him to serve as the God of the cosmological argument, rather than the ontological argument. God's necessity is what allows God to be the ultimate explanation of existence. This is different, at least on the surface, from the previous answer: where Hughes bends his account of necessity to the strictures of logical positivism and tries to save it within them, Rainier argues instead that necessity is not a logical matter at all, but a metaphysical matter. It is not a property of propositions about God, but a property of God. With this, Findlay's argument is evaded. God may lack logical necessity, yet exist necessarily all the same, for logical necessity was not the kind of necessity God was supposed to have in the first place.³⁸

John Hick offers a more developed view of essentially the same line of response a decade later in “God as Necessary Being”:³⁹ Hick argues that's God's existence is what he calls *factual* necessity, rather than logical necessity, and it is that factual necessity that allows him to serve as the ground of existence in the contingency argument. The basic structure of this cosmological line of response in

³⁷ Rainier, A.C.A. “Necessity and God: A Reply to Professor Findlay.” *Mind* (58): 75-77. 1949.

³⁸ Of course, these different notions of necessity may come together. Both the ontological and cosmological arguments end in the necessity of God, though they come to it in different ways. But attacks on the premises of one might leave the other unscathed.

³⁹ Hick, J. “God as Necessary Being.” *Journal of Philosophy* (57): 725-734. 1960.

both Rainier and Hick has two parts: first, deny that God's necessity is logical necessity, and thereby show that criticisms of logically necessary existence do not apply to it; second, explain what else divine necessity is instead, in terms of the requirements placed on God by the cosmological argument: eternity, immutability, independence, *aseity*.

Kant thought his criticism of the ontological argument extended to the contingency argument, as the contingency argument depends on the necessary existence of the ontological argument.⁴⁰ What would it mean for Findlay's argument if Kant is right? Then criticisms like those of Rainier and Hick, i.e., cosmological responses, are misguided. They deny that the necessity of God is the necessity of the ontological argument, and assert that Kantian criticisms therefore do not apply. But if the necessity of the cosmological argument is essentially the same as that of the ontological argument, and the former contains the latter, then problem arises just the same for the new necessities as they do for logical necessity. Perhaps Kant was wrong to tie the two arguments together in this way, and perhaps Rainier and Hick are right that they in fact come apart, but there is at least a potential problem here: are we sure that a being *can* exist independently, in the ways demanded by the contingency argument, if it is *not* logically necessary? Are we sure that there is a form of necessity distinct from logical and physical?

In the meantime, parallel to the development of these cosmological responses, the type of ontological response first given by Hughes was developing quickly into a new form of the ontological argument. Perhaps, contra Findlay,

⁴⁰ Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Anchor 1966. Pp. 404-410.

necessary existence *is* possible after all. If so, then God *must* exist, for if a necessary being is possible, then it exists. Norman Malcolm, in 1960, finds a nascent version of this argument as far back as Anselm:

What Anselm has proved is that the notion of contingent existence cannot have any application to God. His existence must either be logically necessary or logically impossible. The only intelligible way of rejecting Anselm's claim ... is to maintain that the concept of God is self-contradictory or nonsensical. Supposing that this is false, Anselm is right to deduce God's necessary existence.⁴¹

God is either necessary or impossible,⁴² and God is not impossible. Therefore, God exists necessarily. This response to Findlay set the stage for the modal ontological argument.

That argument depends on the possibility of the necessary being. Malcolm was thinking about Findlay's ontological disproof as he developed this argument, and he addresses Findlay directly. It cannot be true that every existential proposition is contingent, he says, because people *use language* to assert necessary existence of God. Meaning is grounded in use, so the language must be meaningful. In a prototypically Wittgensteinian passage, Malcolm proclaims, "this language game is played!"⁴³ This seems too quick – how could a Wittgensteinian criticize *any* language as meaningless, if all language is used? At any rate, if we take meaning to imply possibility, then we have a new, or perhaps a reflection back to an old,

⁴¹ Malcolm, N. "Anselm's Two Ontological Arguments." *The Philosophical Review* (69): 41-62. 1960.

⁴² Or perhaps we do not have a clear enough of a concept of God, as Aquinas thought, to make that determination.

⁴³ Malcolm, pp. 56-60.

ontological argument: God is possible; if God is possible, then God exists necessarily; so God exists.

Alvin Plantinga later offers a version of this modal ontological argument in terms of possible worlds. If God is possible, then there is in some possible world a being of maximal perfections, where that latter quality in Plantinga entails that the being exists in all possible worlds – including the actual world. God’s possibility thus entails his necessary existence.⁴⁴ If, that is, contra Findlay, God is not impossible. For to say that God is possible is just to say that there is in *some* possible world a being who possesses these excellences in *every* possible world – including the actual. So if God is possible, then God exists.⁴⁵

But that is equivalent to saying that if it is possible that God does not exist, then God does not exist. So, what if one of those possible worlds is inconsistent with God’s perfections?

Malcolm and Plantinga are both defending the meaningfulness of language about God’s necessary existence, Malcolm in terms of its use and Plantinga in terms of possible worlds semantics. If necessary existence is thus meaningful and possible, then Findlay’s argument fails, whatever the details of *God’s* necessary existence might mean. Findlay’s argument was grounded in criticisms of necessary existence generally: the impossibility of God was just a side effect of the more general impossibility of necessary existence. Malcolm and Plantinga do two jobs at once:

⁴⁴ See the caveat in the opening chapter about saying that God is *in* some world; I mean by it only that both God and the world exist – i.e., that the world does not preclude the existence of God.

⁴⁵ Plantinga, A. *God, Freedom and Evil*. Eerdmans Publishing. 1974.

they try to make the notion of God's necessity plausible again, contra the criticisms of the Humean-Kantian-early Wittgensteinian traditions, and they try to show that the possibility of God's necessity means that God has to exist after all.

The two lines of response to Findlay's argument *both* lead to arguments for the existence of God. The responses of Malcolm, Plantinga, and others lead to a new ontological argument; the responses of Rainier and Hick, grounding necessity in *aseity*, independence, eternity, immutability, and the like lead to the contingency argument. The roads lead perhaps to the same point for Findlay at any rate: his claim that necessary existence is impossible, which seemed so apparent in 1948 that all he needed to do to defend it was to gesture towards the inclinations of "the modern mind," was by 1960 thought to be weak enough that the argument faded into relative obscurity. But it is still a compelling starting point for an argument; what can we do to revive it?

Suppose that the premise that necessary existence is impossible is beyond rescue at this point, in the wake of Saul Kripke and Alvin Plantinga and nearly seventy years of metaphysics. What then? Findlay thought that if we say that God is a necessary being, we are determined to speak theistically no matter how the empirical circumstances turn out. But the problem of evil throw a wrench into the idea that we should speak theistically no matter how the world turns out. Should we call a being good no matter what he does?

The possibility of necessary existence generally does not mean that each and every being can pass the tests of necessary existence; how might we determine whether *God* can? God has a particular set of qualities, including perfect goodness

and omnipotence, and they are *essential* qualities. It is one thing to say that the laws of mathematics exist necessarily, and quite another to say that a perfect being exists necessarily. The details of the world are relevant to the latter and not the former; the problem of evil affects the latter, and not the former. How can God exist in all possible worlds, given the wide variety of moral differences that obtain in them? The ontological problem of evil is about that particular problem, rather than the more abstract, diffuse question of whether necessary existence is possible.

This will entail examining several things in the chapters ahead: what does necessary existence itself mean, in the wake of the changes in modal metaphysics since Findlay? What role does God's freedom play in the existence of a possible world, or actualization, of a world? Do possible worlds depend on God, or are they independent of him? Findlay saw that the necessity of God might mean that God is irrelevant to the details of the empirical world:

The religious frame of mind seems, in fact, to be in a quandary; it seems invincibly determined both to eat its cake and have it. It desires the Divine Existence both to have that inescapable character which can, on modern views, only be found where truth reflects an arbitrary convention, and also the character of 'making a real difference' which is only possible where truth doesn't have this merely linguistic basis.⁴⁶

The logical positivism of his time led Findlay to think that all necessity is *de dicto*, and not *de re*; there is, therefore, no necessary *existence*. God must be both analytic, "an arbitrary convention," and synthetic, thus "making a real difference." This is what is impossible about God. God's necessary *existence* is impossible, for Findlay, because necessary existence is a confused notion, but the kind of necessity God

⁴⁶ Findlay, p. 181-2.

might have instead, i.e., analytic or logical necessity, is irrelevant to such questions about existence and our universe. God must exist no matter what the empirical circumstances turn out to be, but God cannot meet that demand while also somehow remaining *relevant* to the empirical circumstances. It is a short step from that question to the ontological problem of evil.

God *is* supposed to be relevant to the world, in a way that other candidates for the title of 'necessary being' are not. God, though necessary and independent of the world, is nevertheless supposed to be the creator of the world, and the source of all explanations of why it is as it is. The problem of evil arises in part because the characteristics of the world do affect how we think about God, or at least ought to do so. Necessary existence means that God exists no matter what the world is like. God's qualities and the qualities of the world thus can have no bearing on each other.

This is one way to frame the ontological problem of evil, as a problem separate from but grown out of the soil of the ontological disproof. God's necessary existence is impossible, not for any reasons having to do with necessary existence in general, not from any concerns about logical positivism and the like, but because God's qualities are supposed to be relevant to the empirical circumstances of the world – and not just of the actual world, for if we pay attention to what the necessary existence of God really means, then God's qualities are relevant to the details of every possible world. Those details are likewise relevant to the question of whether God exists in those worlds. If any of those worlds contains anything

incompatible with God's perfections, then God does not exist in all possible worlds, and God is therefore impossible.

So where does the ontological disproof stand now? It is not as though necessary existence is an uncontroversial, benign philosophical notion: it still might be impossible, and if it is, Findlay was right, and God is impossible. Findlay's argument deserves another hearing on its own terms. It could remind people who are skeptical of the notion of necessary existence, and surely there are many such people, what the consequences of that position are for the existence of God, beyond its impact on defusing the ontological argument. Findlay's own version is an interesting and I think unfairly neglected argument. But if we ask whether the argument as it stands is more than *interesting* and qualifies as something like a *proof*, the answer is that it very likely does not. If we are unsure about the metaphysics of necessary existence, then we must be unsure to that same degree about Findlay's argument.

Either necessary existence is impossible, or it's not; for the purposes of this dissertation, I will assume that it is not. At any rate, I find necessary existence a plausible enough notion. I am writing this dissertation under the aegis of the City University of New York Graduate Center, home of Saul Kripke, who is probably more responsible for making the notion of necessary existence respectable again than anyone else in the last half-century, for instance here:

Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object When we think of a property as essential to an object we usually mean that it is true of that object in any case where it would have

existed. A rigid designator of a necessary existent can be called *strongly rigid*.⁴⁷

The name 'God', in these terms, would be a strongly rigid designator of a being such that, if it existed, it would exist in all possible worlds,⁴⁸ and for whom the properties of omnipotence and goodness are essential, such that it is true of God that God is good and omnipotent in any possible world in which God exists, and likewise for whatever properties are essential to God. It might be false that such a being exists and in what follows, I hope to show that it *is* false, but it's hard to seriously maintain in the wake of the success of Kripke's semantics that such language is *meaningless*. That was a natural enough thing to say in 1948, but no more. There are other ways to give meaning to language about necessary existence: David Lewis,⁴⁹ Robert Stalnaker,⁵⁰ Alvin Plantinga,⁵¹ and a host of others have made contributions in this direction, and that tide collectively tends away from J.N. Findlay's second premise. But there is at any rate a better way forward for the argument than to try to relitigate the case against necessary existence.

It need not be the case that necessary existence is impossible to generate an ontological disproof of the existence of God. All we need to do is to show that *God's* necessary existence is impossible. There might well be necessary beings other than God, after all. The theist could agree with this: Alvin Plantinga himself, for example,

⁴⁷ Kripke, S. *Naming and Necessity*. P. 48. Princeton University Press. 1980.

⁴⁸ See Goodwin, G. "De Re Modality and the Ontological Argument." In Shields, G. *Process and Analysis: Whitehead, Hartshorne, and the Analytic Tradition*. SUNY Press. 2002.

⁴⁹ Lewis, D. "Anselm and Actuality", *Noûs* 4: 175-188. 1970.

⁵⁰ Stalnaker, R. *Context and Content*. Pp. 78-85. Oxford University Press. 1999.

⁵¹ Plantinga, A. *The Nature of Necessity*. Clarendon. 1974

suggests sets, Platonic forms, and possibilia as members of the class of necessary beings other than God.⁵² So why not focus our attention on the necessity of God in particular, rather than on the inchoate metaphysical question of necessary existence itself? It may be that there are a great many necessary beings, though God is not one of them, because the necessity of God in particular is impossible.

If we leave aside the claim that necessary existence is impossible, we still have enough of the ontological disproof left at our disposal to make a more forceful and pointed attack: necessity *is* essential to the concept of God, and that fact turns out to be to still generate an ontological disproof if it turns out that a necessary God is impossible. Findlay's own reasons for thinking that God could not be a necessary being were flawed, but we have better reasons for thinking it in the problem of evil. If evil incompatible with God is possible, then God is impossible. And surely such evil is possible.

We can then grant that necessary existence is possible, or at least that we do not know that it is impossible. The necessary existence of God in particular, however, is unique, because the particular qualities in God are unique: God is perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient, and these qualities are supposed to be relevant after all to the empirical circumstances of the actual world. The actual world depends on God, his power, his goodness, his choices, his wisdom, and his existence in a way in which sets the necessity of God apart from the necessary existence of, say, properties. The problem of evil arises from this relevance. If the

⁵² Plantinga, A. "Actualism and Possible Worlds." *Theoria* 42: 139-160.

qualities of God were not supposed to make a difference in the way the world turns out, then the problem of evil would not arise.

What sort of trouble are we in? God is perfectly good; God is omnipotent; evil exists. The traditional problem of evil asks whether these attributes of God can be reconciled with the actual world. That is a difficult problem already, but it is only asking about two particular qualities of God, and whether they can be reconciled with one world – the actual world. But if God is a necessary being, then the same problem arises for every possible world, for if God exists, then he exists in every possible world. Further, his qualities are not accidental; they are essential. God not only exists, but exists with his essential, perfect attributes intact in every possible world. If God exists, then *every possible world* is ruled by a sovereign being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. These are the makings of a powerful *reductio*. Not every world is compatible with the perfections of God.

The ontological disproof can therefore be revived as the ontological problem of evil:

1. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.
2. If God exists necessarily, then nothing incompatible with God's existence is metaphysically possible.
3. Evil incompatible with the existence of God is metaphysically possible.

Therefore, God does not exist.

This argument does not depend on the claim that necessary existence is impossible. Instead, it claims that the problem of evil contains possibilities that do the same work: they entail that *God* cannot exist necessarily, whatever we might think of

triangles or the form of the good, because if he did, all possible evil would be compatible with the goodness of God. And not all possible evils *are* compatible with the goodness of God.

Such is the role that the ontological problem of evil can play. If it is sound, it completes the ontological disproof. Next, we will see how the same move in reverse can resurrect the aims of another argument from the same time period: the logical problem of evil.

3. From Mackie to Findlay

“It used to be widely held that evil – which for present purposes we may identify with undeserved pain and suffering – was incompatible with the existence of God: that no possible world contained both God and evil. So far as I am able to tell, this thesis is no longer defended.”⁵³

Parallel to the brief life of J.N. Findlay’s ontological disproof, another argument against the existence of God was brewing: J.L. Mackie’s logical problem of evil. Findlay’s argument appeared in 1948, and by 1960 John Hick had given it its last serious direct answer. Mackie’s argument appeared in 1955,⁵⁴ and it still frames the contemporary conception of the problem of evil, though negatively – the evidential problem of evil is a moderation of Mackie’s claims. Nelson Pike had already given the standard response to it by 1963,⁵⁵ a response which was later amplified by Alvin Plantinga’s modal defense.⁵⁶

I believe that an opportunity was missed. By the early 1960’s, both the ontological disproof and the logical problem of evil had both been thoroughly criticized. There is, however, a way forward for both arguments. The problem of evil, as I argued in the last chapter, makes the ontological disproof a more forceful argument; the ontological problem of evil likewise makes the problem of evil a more forceful argument. The problems that arise for the logical problem of evil as Mackie framed it disappear when necessary existence is included in the conception of God at stake in the problem.

⁵³ Van Inwagen, Peter. “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence.” *Philosophical Perspectives* (5). 1991.

⁵⁴ Mackie, J.L. “Evil and Omnipotence.” *Mind* (64): 200-212. 1955.

⁵⁵ Pike, N. “Hume on Evil.” *The Philosophical Review* (72) 2: 180-197. 1963.

⁵⁶ Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom and Evil*. Eerdmans Publishing. 1977.

J.L. Mackie framed the problem of evil as a *logical* problem. The problem of evil, if Mackie is right, shows that the theist:

... must now be prepared to believe, not what merely cannot be proved, but what can be *disproved* from other beliefs that he also holds.⁵⁷

Mackie frames the logical problem as a contradiction among the beliefs of the theist – and not just among his beliefs, but among his *essential* beliefs.⁵⁸

There is a whole constellation of arguments that could rightly be called 'logical' problems of evil, but Mackie's argument dominates the category in a way not true of, say, the cosmological argument, or theodicy, where variety is presumed.⁵⁹ It could be that there are several different logical problems that arise out of the conflict between evil and God, and some subtle consequences follow from his framing the problem in precisely Mackie's terms.

First, belief: Mackie could have left belief out of the problem altogether, and argued instead that there is an inconsistent set of *propositions* involving God and evil, where those propositions assert that there is evil in the world and that certain properties are essential to God. There might, after all, be some set of true propositions that renders God impossible, even if the theist didn't believe them, or perhaps even hadn't considered some of them. This might seem minor, but in fact it amounts to a difference in whether the problem of evil is supposed to be about the

⁵⁷ Mackie, p. 200.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ There are other accounts of the logical problem of evil, e.g., that in McCloskey, H. J. (1960), "God and Evil," *Philosophical Quarterly* 10: 97-114, and in M. Scriven's *Primary Philosophy* (1966), but they are formally very similar to Mackie's – they involve the same qualities of God, and differ more in their interpretations of that formal problem.

psychology of some believer, or about the existence of God. Whether God exists is a more serious problem, I think, than whether some person contradicts himself.

Second, there are just two attributes of God at stake in the problem, omnipotence and goodness, where there could surely be more. Mackie left out omniscience, for instance. Evil could be a challenge to the sovereignty of God instead, or to the justice of God – surely justice is not equivalent to goodness. I think, of course, that necessity turns out to be an enormously important attribute. There is historical inertia involved in framing the problem of evil around omnipotence and goodness specifically: Epicurus offered his trilemma in these terms, as transmitted to us via Lactantius,⁶⁰ and Hume frames the problem in this Epicurean way in the *Dialogues*,⁶¹ ensuring the continuing influence of this construction of the problem. Perhaps it a metaphysical problem for Epicurus and Hume, or a moral problem, or some combination, or, perhaps they hadn't thought to categorize it at all, or thought that it crossed the boundaries of some set of these philosophical categories.⁶² Perhaps they *did* think that it was a logical problem, and didn't think that fact needed to be said. At any rate, Mackie does say it, and so he offers a challenge: can evil mean that God is *impossible*?

The logical problem of evil, for Mackie, is the inconsistency of the following set of propositions:

6. God is omnipotent.

⁶⁰ Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*. In Larrimore, M. *The Problem of Evil*, Routledge. 2001.

⁶¹ Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Book X. Hackett. 1998.

⁶² Hume asserts that there are “no inferences more certain and infallible than these” in Book X, but then admits the possibility that evil could be explained if we knew the existence of God a priori in Book XI. His considered position is hard to pin down.

7. God is wholly good.

8. Evil exists.

Now, there is no *explicit* contradiction in this set: nothing in it is both affirmed and denied, as in “Evil exists, and evil does not exist.” If there is a contradiction, it is implicit, and must be brought out.

Mackie realizes this: he says that there “*seems* to be some contradiction between these proposition,” for their incompatibility “does not arise immediately.” For the argument to work, one must first grant the truth of what he calls, curiously, “quasi-logical rules or additional premises,” namely that:

9. There are no non-logical limits to omnipotence.

and:

10. Good things always eliminate evil as far as they can.⁶³

These additional premises carry a heavy load in Mackie’s argument. The problem of evil could be a deadly-serious problem without being the *contradiction* that Mackie claims it to be. It could cast serious moral doubt on God’s goodness and power, it could test one’s faith, it could be evidence against the existence of God, all without rendering God *logically impossible*, or making belief in God contradictory. For Mackie’s argument to reach that particular conclusion, he needs those “quasi-logical rules” to be true. More to the point, as we will see, if Plantinga’s modal defense is right, he needs them to be *necessary* truths, for if it is possible that a wholly good being would not eliminate evil, then the omnipotence and goodness of God can be reconciled with evil after all.

⁶³ Mackie, J.L. “Evil and Omnipotence.” *Mind* (64): 200-212. 1955.

Mackie's argument is therefore aimed at establishing a contradiction between the propositions 'God is omnipotent,' 'God is wholly good,' and 'Evil exists', all of which are, he claims, essential to theistic belief. But if a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do, then if the theist believes that God is omnipotent and wholly good, his own beliefs entail that evil must not exist after all. Similar results follow if he believes any other combination of two of the three propositions: any two, plus the quasi-logical rules, entail that the third is false. So, if the so-called quasi-logical rules are true, then there is an inconsistent set of essential theistic beliefs.

The solution, as Mackie sees it, is to give up one of the propositions that together generate the problem. If one does not believe that God is omnipotent, that God is wholly good, or that evil exists, the problem does not arise. If one tries to hold onto all three, however, one *must* be committing a logical fallacy, for we can see already that the set is contradictory. Mackie therefore devotes the remainder of his paper – the majority of it – to debunking so-called “fallacious solutions” that try to hold onto all three propositions at once, like “The universe is better with some evil in it,” or “Evil is due to human free will.”⁶⁴

The common thread Mackie sees in these solutions (we might as well just call them theodicies) is that they equivocate on the words in the problem, like 'good', 'evil', or 'omnipotent'. They must equivocate, he suggests, for we know that good things always eliminate evil as far as they can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. So, assuming that the theist means the same things by

⁶⁴ Mackie, pp. 203-212.

these words that Mackie does, when the theist suggests that God will allow some evil, he *must* be equivocating.

There is a hole in this argument: the theist may never have believed these so-called quasi-logical rules, particularly with respect to evil and God's goodness. In framing this as a problem in theistic belief, Mackie opens himself to the response from a theist that he or she never believed in the first place that God would eliminate all evil. Evil might make the world better, or God might have to interfere with our free will. If this argument is supposed to reveal a contradiction in theistic *belief*, and the theist does not believe what the problem ascribes to him, then the problem vanishes. Such a response completely defuses the argument as Mackie frames it. If, on the other hand, the problem of evil is not about the theist's belief, but about the actual relationship between God and evil, then the problem cannot be so easily resolved.

Perhaps Mackie just meant his framing of the problem in terms of theistic belief to be a rhetorical device to reveal a contradiction in the concept of God. At any rate, he ought to have, and we can reveal that contradiction more clearly if we frame the argument in terms of what is *true* about good, evil, and omnipotence, rather than in terms of what the theist believes about them. We could say instead that the propositions 'God is omnipotent', 'God is wholly good', and 'Evil exists' are an inconsistent set which reveal two essential qualities of God and a fact about the world. We could further try to show that the quasi-logical rules, or some other propositions that do the same job, are *true*, independently of whether the theist believes them or not.

If the existence of evil is just a fact about the world around us, then that fact, together with the truth of the propositions that a wholly good being would eliminate evil as far as it could, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being could do, would entail that either God is not wholly good, or that God is not omnipotent. No mention of theistic belief need be made. Instead, we have an argument that God lacks an essential property – a logical argument, in some sense of the word ‘logical’ not too far removed from what Mackie intended,⁶⁵ from evil to the impossibility of God.

But do we know that these additional premises about good, evil, and omnipotence are true? To call them “quasi-logical” is quite a stretch: they are not in the least bit about logic. They are premises about God and evil, more metaphysical and moral than logical. They carry most of the weight of the argument, and nowhere in the paper does Mackie actually defend them. He seems to think that they are matters of the meaning of the words good, evil and omnipotent, and need no further elucidation. But the entire argument hinges on them: if they are true, then either evil does not exist (an answer at odds with human experience), or God lacks an essential quality.

This may be why Mackie framed the problem as he did: if he claims that the theist already believes them, and *must* believe them as a matter essential to theism, then he has no need to argue that they are true. And arguing that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, in particular, looks like a tall order, especially

⁶⁵ Mackie defines a logical problem as “the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs.” Change ‘beliefs’ to ‘propositions’, and the problem we are discussing disappears.

in the face of the long, complex history of theodicy. This is the crux of the argument: how do we know that a good God would always eliminate evil as far as it can? We certainly cannot do as Mackie did and treat it as a matter of simple word meaning, or as a matter of theistic belief.

The premise that a good thing always prevents evil as far as it can is the keystone of the argument, and it is obviously not merely a logical rule – it is a premise, which might be true and might not. Theists believe that God is good despite the fact that they are presumably aware that he does not prevent evil as far as he can. Philosophical theists are not naïve; they believe that the proposition that a good thing eliminates evil as far as it can, is false. The entire project of theodicy consists of arguments to that end. One would therefore expect theists to turn to the vast resources of the history of theodicy to support their denial that a good thing always eliminates evil and defuse the logical problem.

But a full theodicy might not be necessary to defuse the logical problem. Perhaps all that is needed is a *defense*. What is a defense, and how did it become the standard response to the logical problem of evil?

The answer begins not with Alvin Plantinga, who usually gets credit for it, but with Pike in 1963.⁶⁶ According to Pike, if the logical problem of evil is to work, the premise declaring that a good thing would eliminate evil must be more than merely true: it must be a *necessary* truth. Why so? The reasoning is somewhat more problematic than is usually recognized. Pike gives an analogy to explain what he means. Start with the following three propositions:

⁶⁶ Pike, N. "Hume on Evil." *The Philosophical Review* 72 (1963).

11. All swans are white.
12. Some swans are not large.
13. All white things are large.⁶⁷

Pike asks us to suppose that (13) is true, but not necessarily true. If so, he says, then either (11) or (12) must be false, but the conjunction of (11) and (12) is nevertheless not contradictory.⁶⁸ So let us do what Pike says and suppose that it is contingently true that all white things are large. He tells us that if this is so, then either (11) or (12) *must be false*, but the conjunction of the two is nevertheless not a contradiction.

What could it mean to say that one of two propositions *must* be false, if the two are not contradictory? Well, a contradiction occurs when the same proposition is asserted and denied, and even if (13) were true, (11) and (12) would still not be the same proposition. To carry his analogy over to the problem of evil, even if Mackie's "quasi-logical rules" were true, there would *still* be no contradiction in theistic belief, for none of the propositions 'God is omnipotent', 'God is wholly good', and 'Evil exists' is a denial of the others.

Pike suggests that the quasi-logical rules on which the logical problem depends must therefore be more than true: they must be necessary truths. Only if they were necessary truths would you get an inconsistent set. If it is even possibly false that a wholly good being would eliminate evil, for instance, then there is no inconsistency in Mackie's triad: 'God is omnipotent', 'God is wholly good', and 'Evil

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

exists' could all be true at the same time. They could, specifically, be true whenever the additional premises that a wholly good being would always eliminate evil as far as it can, and that there are no non-logical limits to omnipotence, are false. Hence the need for Mackie's "quasi-logical rules" to be necessary truths.

There is a subtle problem with all of this, which I believe has been the source of an enormous amount of confusion in the literature on the problem of evil. Look back at Pike's swan analogy: if (13) were true, he says, (11) and (12) would still not form an inconsistent set. But Pike seems not to notice that even if (13) were a *necessary* truth, [(11), (12), (13)] would *still* not be an inconsistent set. None of those propositions is the denial of any of the others. The set would *entail* a contradiction, though, all the same, and it would entail a contradiction no matter whether the propositions were contingently or necessarily true. Pike seems to be arguing that the set is not inconsistent simply because one of the propositions *might be false*: in that sense, even 'snow is white' and 'snow is not white' are not inconsistent, for one of them *might be false*! The claim that Mackie's set is not inconsistent because some proposition in it could be false amounts to no more than this.

This is a deep confusion, and it has affected how people have viewed Mackie's argument ever since. The consistency of a set of propositions is not a simple matter of whether some one of them might be false: if all cannot be true at the *same* time, then the set is inconsistent. This is not complicated logic, but it has come to *seem* complicated, because the literature on the problem of evil has confused the questions of the modality of truth on the one hand and consistency on

the other. If all swans are white, and some swans are not large, then it cannot be true – *even contingently true* – that all white things are large, for if it were, further propositions would follow that contradict the initial set. ‘All swans are white’ and ‘All white things are large’, for instance, entails ‘All swans are large’, which contradicts ‘Some swans are not large.’ Pike’s set is inconsistent after all, even though no member of it is necessary.

What has happened here? The consensus, voiced by Peter van Inwagen at the beginning of this chapter, is that Mackie’s quasi-logical rules must be necessary truths. Why so? What would follow from their necessity that would not follow from their contingent truth? If it were true – contingently true, but true all the same – that a good thing would eliminate evil as far as it could, and if it were likewise contingently true that there were no non-limits to what an omnipotent thing could do, it would logically follow either that evil did not exist, that God was not omnipotent, or that God was not wholly good. It might be true that in some *other* circumstance, in some other possible world in which those quasi-logical rules were false, evil could coexist with God’s omnipotence and perfect goodness. But in *this* world, if the quasi-logical rules are true, then one of Mackie’s triad must be false. The idea that the logical problem of evil depends on the necessity of Mackie’s additional principles is a mistake.

The three propositions that make up Mackie’s problem are not and cannot be explicitly contradictory, because no one of them is an explicit denial of any of the others. But with Mackie’s additional premises, they do *entail* a contradiction. In any

world in which Mackie's additional premises are true, either evil does not exist, or God lacks an essential quality.

In Mackie's problem, this works out as follows.

6. God is wholly good.

7. God is omnipotent.

8. Evil exists.

9. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.

10. There are no non-logical limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

Pike is arguing that premises (9) and (10) of this set must be necessary truths if (6)-(8) are going to form a contradictory set. But let us suppose that, say, (7)-(10) are true, but only contingently. It would follow, logically, that God is not wholly good; though that truth would only follow contingently, it would still follow as a logical entailment from the contingent truth of (7)-(10). In some other world in which (9) was false, God might well be good, but we would know – again *logically*, not probably – that God is not good in this world. We would, as with any logical argument, need those premises to be *true* if they are to support the conclusion, but the demand that they be necessary truths is mistaken.

What is right about Pike argument, and about Alvin Plantinga's subsequent modal defense, is that if the additional principles that explain why God would eliminate evil are necessary truths, then there is no world in which both God and evil exist. If they are not necessary truths, then God and evil are compossible – they could exist in the same world, under conditions perhaps different from those in our world. This is true, and important. But they need not be necessary truths to yield the

conclusion that God does not exist, in a strong, logical, but contingent sense. The contingent truth of Mackie's additional principles, together with the evident fact of evil, entails that God does not exist in the actual world, as one of the essential qualities of God must in that case be lost, on pain of logical contradiction. A version of the logical problem of evil can therefore evade the modal defense.

This may not be the logical problem that Mackie had in mind, and it is certainly not the one that critics and defenders have been working on since, but it is a problem nonetheless, and one to which the modal defense is irrelevant. The defender of a logical problem of evil need not defend anything so grandiose as the necessary truth of the premise that explain why God would eliminate evil. Its contingent truth is enough.

I believe that this trouble arises at least in part from framing the problem of evil as a problem of contradiction in the beliefs of the theist. As soon as the problem is framed that way, the theist is free to say, "But that is not at all what I believe." Theists do not believe Mackie's premise that a wholly good thing would always eliminate evil as far as it can, but that premise does not become false just because the theist doesn't believe it; nor should someone inclined to accept it instead abandon it because some theist doesn't believe it. But if the problem is *about* the theist's belief, then of course the problem *must* be framed in terms the theist would accept, which in practice becomes the search for a necessary truth precluding God and evil from existing in the same worlds. Why? Because unless it's necessarily true, he won't believe it, whereas if it's necessary, he will? But the theist wouldn't believe that a wholly good being would eliminate evil even if it *were* a necessary truth (as it

might well be), just as the atheist wouldn't believe that God exists even if *that* were a necessary truth (as the theist believes it is). Our various beliefs are not the most interesting question about the problem of evil anyway. The existence of God is more interesting.

At any rate, the propositions that make up Mackie's problem are these:

6. God is omnipotent.
7. God is wholly good.
8. Evil exists.
9. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
10. There are no non-logical limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

The author of a 'defense' would at this point claim that (9) and (10) must be necessary truths to make the set (6)-(8) contradictory. But this is wrong: *nothing* could make that set contradictory, as none of those propositions is a denial of any of the others. The contradiction arises only when any two of (6)-(8) are combined with (9) and (10) to yield the denial of the third. Mackie said as much.⁶⁹ Propositions (9) and (10), however, need only be contingently true to entail that either (6), (7) or (8) must be false.

What then of the 'defense'? The defense reads the logical problem as claiming that there is no possible world in which (6)-(8) are true, and it responds to that claim. But we could grant that there is some *other* possible world in which (6)-(8) are true, but deny that they are true in the actual world, because (9)-(10) are true in

⁶⁹ Mackie, p. 201.

the actual world. We can, for this problem at least, safely ignore other possible worlds. The logical form of the entailment, if (9)-(10) are simply *true*, is this:

$$14. \Box[(9 \cdot 10) \rightarrow \sim(6 \cdot 7 \cdot 8)]$$

... and not this:

$$15. (9 \cdot 10) \rightarrow \Box \sim(6 \cdot 7 \cdot 8)$$

Proposition (15) says that the contingent truth of (9) and (10) entails that there is no possible world in which (6), (7) and (8) are true. Proposition (15) is a mistake, and the modal defense, if sound, shows it to be false. But the defense is irrelevant to (14), which says only that if (9) and (10) are contingently true, then it is impossible that (6), (7) and (8) also be true *in that same world*.

The logical problem of evil has thus been misunderstood, or at least uncharitably interpreted. Mackie never mentioned possible worlds in his 1955 paper, so to ascribe to him either (14) or (15) is revisionist. If the logical problem is read in the way (15) reads above, then it is probably mistaken – if there is any possible world in which God and evil can coexist, then it *is* mistaken. But one could perfectly well admit the compossibility of God and evil under *other* circumstances, in some other possible world where, perhaps, libertarian free will exists and evil is not so bad, while still asserting that the evil in the *actual* world, given the details, nuances, and particulars of our world, *is* incompatible with the existence of God. This reading is (14), and is more charitable to the logical problem. This latter reading's only "flaw" is that it only works if its premises are true. This is not a flaw.

So there are multiple forms the logical problem of evil can take. The logical problem has been construed too narrowly. Compare what Alvin Plantinga has to say about on the ontological argument:

What about Anselm's argument? Is it a good one? The first thing to recognize is that the ontological argument comes in an enormous variety of versions, some of which may be more promising than others. Instead of speaking of *the* ontological argument, we must recognize that what we have here is a whole family of related arguments.⁷⁰

The logical problem of evil likewise encompasses a whole family of related arguments, and the defeat of one need not entail the defeat of all the others.

Plantinga is the first to call the sort of response we have been examining a "defense"⁷¹: a defense offers the mere possibility of a world in which God and evil coexist, because God has a justification to allow the evil in that world. The logical problem, interpreted as claiming that there is no possible world in which God and evil can coexist, is thereby defused. If such a world is possible, according to the argument, then God and evil are not contradictory concepts. Hence Peter Van Inwagen's confidence that there is no logical problem of evil, with which I began this chapter:

"It used to be widely held that evil – which for present purposes we may identify with undeserved pain and suffering – was incompatible with the existence of God: that no possible world contained both God and evil. So far as I am able to tell, this thesis is no longer defended."⁷²

As far as the literature on the problem of evil goes, he is largely right. The defense marked the end of the logical problem of evil. The mere possibility of an evil

⁷⁰ Plantinga, A., *God, Freedom and Evil*, p. 98.

⁷¹ Plantinga, p. 28.

⁷² Van Inwagen, P. "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence." *Philosophical Perspectives* (5). 1991.

compatible with God is all that is necessary to show that God and evil are not logically incompatible concepts.

As a historical matter, then, J.L. Mackie's logical problem of evil lived a life and died a death similar to those of J.N. Findlay's ontological disproof: both had been thoroughly criticized by the early 1960's, and then philosophical theology generally moved on to consideration of the evidential problem of evil, the modal ontological argument, and so on. There is a way forward for the logical problem of evil, as laid out above: defend the contingent truth of Mackie's quasi-logical rules. This is a logical problem, within "a whole family of related arguments." It is not the evidential problem, because its conclusion is not that God *probably* doesn't exist: if its premises are true, then God absolutely, *logically*, does not exist. We can know that things are true in the actual world, without thinking that they are necessary truths, and without resorting to mere probability. Think of the *cogito* here: if Descartes's argument is sound, then it is not a matter of mere probability that you exist; nor is it true in all possible worlds. It is a matter of certain, though contingent, knowledge. Perhaps our knowledge that the evil in the actual world is unjustified is of this kind: certain, but contingent.

This version of the logical problem, then, requires one only to defend the proposition that there are evils in the actual world incompatible with the existence of God. This is not trivial, but neither is it metaphysically outlandish: it is certainly easier to argue that there are evils in this world incompatible with the goodness of God than it is to argue that all evils in all possible worlds are incompatible with the goodness of God. This is a live option for the logical problem of evil.

But there is still an easier way forward for the logical problem of evil. The last chapter showed how the problem of evil provides a way forward for the ontological disproof; the ontological disproof does the same for the problem of evil. If necessity is essential to God, then the logical problem does not depend on the proposition that all evil in all possible worlds is incompatible with God, or even the proposition that the evil in the *actual* world is incompatible with God. If evil incompatible with God is even metaphysically *possible*, then God is impossible. How does this change things? What is the difference between saying that evil incompatible with God is a metaphysical possibility, and saying that there actually is such evil, or even that such evil is a necessity?

The ways things are – facts, rather than values, we might say – presumably vary across possible worlds: suffering varies in kind, in depth, in reason, and the states of affairs that we could point to that either justify or fail to justify them vary as well. The values by which we judge whether an evil should be prevented are either variant or invariant across possible worlds – the problem will arise equally either way, but let us say that they are invariant, as I happen to think they are. Even if those values are constant, the proposition ‘A perfectly good God would eliminate evil’ would still vary in truth value across worlds, because the facts about what actually happens – what evils obtain, and why – vary from possible world to possible world. Injustice is always unacceptable, but in world A there is none, and in world B, there is some. Suffering is acceptable if it is not pointless; in world A there is no pointless suffering, but in world B pointless suffering exists.

The first step of the ontological problem of evil is to consider this variance, both metaphysically and morally: how different could things be from the way they actually are, and what would those differences mean for the goodness of God if they were to obtain? The modal defense relies on this variance across possibilities to make its case plausible: there would be no difference between a defense and a standard theodicy if the range of states of affairs included in the category 'possible' wasn't larger than the range of states of affairs in the actual world. The modal defense points to the presumably very wide scope and variety of the 'possible', and argues that somewhere in it there is evil compatible with the goodness of God – perhaps even builds a model of it.

The ontological problem of evil, then, points to that same infinite set, the same scope and variety of possibilities that underlie the defense. I suggest that if somewhere in that scope there is evil that is compatible with the goodness of God, then there is very likely also evil that is *incompatible* with the goodness of God. If there were not, if it were somehow glaringly obvious that every evil in every possible world was compatible with the goodness of God, then why would the modal defense argue for the mere possibility of evil compatible with God, rather than for the apparent necessity of it? Why would the problem of evil have arisen at all in the minds of men if evil incompatible with God was *impossible*?

If evil incompatible with the qualities of God is metaphysically possible, then God would not exist in any possible world containing that evil. It does not help to say that God *would* not create that world, because he is good, for it is not merely God's goodness that it is at stake, but his *essential* goodness – his goodness in all

possible worlds, as he is a necessary being. If worlds with such evil are nevertheless possible, then God lacks his essential goodness in some possible worlds, and does not exist in those worlds, and is therefore not necessary – and, as the ontological disproof shows up, therefore not possible either. The appeal of the modal defense to what is out there in other possible worlds opens a Pandora’s box that cannot be closed when it turns on you.

The necessity of God is integral to this problem. If all that is involved in the concept of God are the qualities Mackie mentioned, omnipotence and goodness, then God might very well exist in some possible worlds and not in others. We can grant that it is possible for a wholly good, omnipotent being to exist, perhaps together with evil in some circumstances, and perhaps not. What obtains in some possibilities need not have much to do with what obtains in others. If God were not necessary, one could perfectly well say that God exists under certain conditions or in certain possibilities, and not in others. If there is no more to God than omnipotence and goodness, then the existence of God could vary from condition to condition, possibility to possibility. But not so. God’s existence must be invariant across possibilities.

This is how the literature normally treats the problem of evil – as varying from condition to condition. Consider William Rowe’s fawn in the forest fire:⁷³ if there is any pointless suffering, God does not exist. If not, then God might well exist. For Rowe, these two conditions represent epistemic possibilities; what if instead

⁷³ Rowe, William. “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* (16). 1979.

they are two *metaphysical* possibilities – one with and one without pointless suffering? God's existence cannot vary across possibilities if he is a necessary being. On the other hand, God's existence *has* to vary across possibilities to make sense of the problem of evil, to make sense of the distinction between good and evil, to fit our judgment that pointless evil counts against God in a way in which justified evil does not. A God whose goodness is totally divorced from what he does, whose goodness has nothing to do with the world he creates, is meaningless. God's goodness cannot be meaningless.

Mackie wanted to show that the problem of evil is more than a call for introspection, a mystery to be revealed, a scientific problem. The problem of evil means that God is impossible. How does the ontological disproof help to prove this conclusion?

One can think that evil is ultimately justified, or one can think that evil is ultimately unjustified, but the manner in which these beliefs can be held varies perhaps infinitely from there. There are theodicies of various emphases, complexities and levels of confidence; there are skeptical theists; there are free will theodicies, greater good theodicies, and the belief that this is the best of all possible worlds. On the other side of the problem, there are various levels of confidence that evil is unjustified, from the conviction that there is a contradiction in believing in both God and the existence of evil, to belief that evil merely makes God improbable. The moral reasons to be skeptical of theodicy vary, from Hume's skepticism of the

world's architecture,⁷⁴ to Mill's skepticism that we can apply our word 'good' to God without abusing its meaning,⁷⁵ to Kant's assertion, via consideration of *Job*, that we have rights even before God.⁷⁶

Stripped down, though, the two fundamental answers to the problem of evil are that evil is ultimately justified, or that it is not – that God can explain evil, or that there is no explanation for it. Take these basic answers and add some quantifiers, and you have at least the following possible positions on the problem of evil:

-It is necessary that evil is justified. This has no name.

-It is actually true that evil is justified. This is theodicy.

-It is probable that evil is justified. This is the basic form of the theistic response to the evidential problem.

-It is possible that evil is justified. This is the modal defense.

-It is necessarily true that evil is not justified. This is the logical problem of evil, as interpreted by the modal defense.

-It is actually true that evil is not justified. This, strangely, has no unique name.

-It is probable that evil is not justified. This is the evidential problem.

-It is possible that evil is not justified. This has no name.

There is open terrain on this map. We have been categorizing the problem of evil too narrowly.

⁷⁴ See, e.g., David Hume's extended discussion in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Books X-XI.

⁷⁵ J.S. Mill took this approach in *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. 1865.

⁷⁶ Immanuel Kant offered this answer in "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy." (In *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Wood, A. and di Giovanni, G. CUP. 2001.)

The ontological problem of evil fills in that last space. It has likely gone unfilled because there was no perceived need for it – what difference could the mere possibility of unjustified evil make? If we didn't notice the difference it makes, it's because we were neglecting the necessity of God.

And so we have the ontological problem of evil:

1. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.

2. If God exists necessarily, then nothing incompatible with God's existence is metaphysically possible.

3. Evil incompatible with the existence of God is metaphysically possible.

Therefore, God does not exist.

The logical problem of evil, as it is interpreted by the modal defense, claims that there is no possible world in which God and evil can coexist; the ontological problem of evil claims only that there is some world where they cannot. The former claim has a universal scope, and the latter has a particular scope. That makes an enormous difference. The traditional logical problem of evil has to be right about every possible world to demonstrate the impossibility of God, but this argument needs only to be right about one.

The types of response one can reasonably give to this argument are likewise structurally very different than those one can give to the traditional logical problem. Modal defenses are irrelevant to this argument, for instance: it could be that there are possible worlds with evils that are compatible with the existence of God *and* possible worlds with evils that are incompatible with the existence of God. Both can be true, so defense is not a response to this argument: it is not a denial of anything

the argument asserts. A defense as a response to this problem is analogous to my asserting that someone has green eyes, and you asserting that someone else does not.

Theodicies are likewise irrelevant – not just some of them, but all of them, if a theodicy is a justification of the evil in the actual world. Unless one thinks that the evil in the actual world exhausts all possible evil, the aim of theodicy is too narrow. Even if all of the evil in the actual world is justified, if there is nevertheless some merely possible evil that is incompatible with the goodness of God, then the ontological problem of evil is unaffected by that theodicy.

This makes it a strange problem: theodicy and defense, as normally construed, are irrelevant. The normal categories in which we think about the problem of evil fail us here. *It is possible that evil is not justified*: this position on the problem of evil had no name, presumably because there was no reason to think about it. But there is a reason. It puts the necessity of God in doubt. The ontological problem of evil, by borrowing an element of the ontological disproof, offers a way forward for the logical problem of evil, and for the idea that evil renders God impossible.

4. What Does 'Evil Incompatible with God' Mean?

We have reached the same problem from two directions. If God exists necessarily, then everything in every possible world is compatible with his existence. Necessity is essential to God. So if God exists, then *every possible evil* is compatible with the existence and perfect goodness of God.

Strangeness does not equal impossibility, but strange this position definitely is. It is difficult enough for me to reconcile myself with the idea that every actual evil, every evil that has ever occurred in our world, is compatible with God's existence. The inherent implausibility of that concept can be measured roughly by the sheer amount of theodicy written by people who were trying to come to grips with it. And that is just when the scope of the problem is restricted to the actual world: now imagine things infinitely worse. What is the worst possible world? Is even *that* compatible with the goodness of God?

If we suspect that not every possible evil is compatible with the existence of God, then we have a *reductio* brewing, the synthesis of the ontological disproof and the problem of evil towards which the last two chapters pointed:

1. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.
2. If God exists necessarily, then evil incompatible with God's existence is impossible.
3. Evil incompatible with God's existence is possible.

Therefore, God does not exist.

The new element in this argument, i.e. the one that does not appear in the Epicurean trilemma passed down to us through Lactantius,⁷⁷ Hume,⁷⁸ and Mackie,⁷⁹ is necessity. The problem of evil has neglected that element of the concept of God, and the introduction of it has dramatic consequences. It means that an argument against the existence of God can rest on a mere possibility.

So, is evil incompatible with God possible?

Let us start by clarifying some of the language in the argument. What do we mean by “evil incompatible with God”? There is natural evil and moral evil, suffering, so-called *horrendous* suffering,⁸⁰ sin (perhaps), divine silence,⁸¹ imperfection, *undeserved* suffering, injustice. All of these overlap in that they arise within the problem of evil, but they are distinct problems. Perhaps, like Hume, we should just give a list in place of a definition: rheumatisms, “miasmas,” the psychological torments of our own invention, and the like.⁸² Illustrating evil by example is a popular alternative to defining it: Dostoevsky’s discussion of the problem of evil in *The Brothers Karamazov* leans on a list as well, in particular on a list of tortures inflicted on children, to carry the weight of his discussion.⁸³ William Rowe’s discussion of the problem primarily centers on examples – the fawn in the

⁷⁷ Lactantius, *De Ira Dei*. In Larrimore, M. ed., *The Problem of Evil*. Blackwell 2000.

⁷⁸ Hume, D., *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Book X, ed. Norman Kemp Smith. MacMillan 1947.

⁷⁹ Mackie, p. 200.

⁸⁰ Adams, M.M. *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

⁸¹ Schellenberg, J.L. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Cornell University Press, 1993.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ See F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book V, Ch. 4. In Pojman and Rea, *The Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 243-249. 7th ed. Cengage. 2015.

forest fire, famously, an example carefully chosen to make life hard for the free will and greater good theodicies.⁸⁴

We need more than a list. But perhaps a good definition of evil for our purposes ought to be grounded in that variety, and in the particular events that make particular people question the goodness of God – those states of affairs that have, as types, regularly made people thus question God’s goodness, like the torturing of children that drove Dostoevsky’s discussion, or the sufferings of animals that seem to lead to no greater good. Admittedly, we might be wrong about some or all of them. Some might be justified when we think they are not, and some might be unjustified when we think a theodicy explains them away.

We should absolutely not build justification or the lack of it into the very term ‘evil’, on pain of begging the question of the entire subject. We could enumerate quite a list of evils from this starting point: if an event makes someone sincerely question the goodness of God, then it is relevant to our discussion, even if his or her doubts are ultimately misplaced, and even if someone *else* acknowledges the same state of affairs as an evil – i.e., as a matter that makes some people question God’s goodness – without herself doubting the goodness of God at all. The faith of the latter person does not obviate the doubt of the former: if an evil is enough to generate a doubt in someone, it is relevant to the philosophical discussion of the problem of evil.

From there, we can build up to the question of *actual* justification. An evil incompatible with God is an evil that either *does not* or *could not* in fact have an

⁸⁴ Hard, but not impossible, he acknowledges.

ultimate justification, where now the question is metaphysical, not epistemic.⁸⁵ An evil incompatible with God is an evil for which explanation actually fails, for which no theodicy or defense holds – an evil of a kind, scope, intensity, or other quality such that, if it existed, it would mean that God was not good. An evil incompatible with God is both a metaphysical and a moral category, but not an epistemic one. Our epistemic access to it may be faulty: we might think that some evil is incompatible with God's goodness when it is not, or vice-versa.

There are two categories to think through here. An evil that *could not* have an ultimate justification is stronger than one that merely *does not*. When Ivan Karamazov asks his brother whether he would, if he had the power, build heaven on the ground of one tortured child,⁸⁶ he is suggesting that there are evils that could not have a justification. He is suggesting that there are evils that are *unjustifiable*, and not just contingently unjustified. Unjustifiable evils are evils that simply cannot be reconciled with God's perfections, no matter what greater good came from them, no matter what relationship they had to free will, no matter what.

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child who beat itself on the breast with its little fist and prayed in its stinking outhouse, with its unexpiated tears to 'dear, kind God!' It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible? ... Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its

⁸⁵ The word 'ultimate' here is meant to imply both that it is God's own decisions with respect to these evils that are in question here, and not just our own, and that we are looking for a final answer on whether a perfect being ought to cause or permit them to exist, as opposed to lesser senses of the word 'justification', in which we might say that you *have* a justification for acting in some way, though you ultimately ought not to do so.

⁸⁶ Dostoevsky, p. 248.

breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth.⁸⁷

“Is it possible?” Ivan asks. Is the question rhetorical? Ivan is pointing towards a position within which the horrors inflicted on children are simply unjustifiable: nothing in heaven could possibly be worth them, and no morally intact person ought to want to be part of a heaven in which they are rationalized and accepted. This, if Ivan Karamazov is right, is the form of an unjustifiable evil, and the cases he offers in the chapter exemplify that form.

To say that there is an evil that merely *does not* have a justification, on the other hand, is weaker. Consider some evil that could have been justified by a greater good, but as it happens in the world in question that good does not obtain. Such an evil would be unjustified, even though it is perfectly well justifiable: it could have had a justification, but simply does not. Take the trolley problem; imagine that it is in fact justifiable to pull the switch and kill one person to save five. Now, imagine the nearby possible world in which all the facts are the same, except the five people on the first track in the original story are simply not there. You pull the switch and kill the one anyway. Such a move is, in principle, *justifiable*, under certain conditions, for instance if the move saved five lives, but those are conditions that did not obtain. It is justified, so to speak, in a nearby possible world in which you saved those five people, but it is certainly not justified as things stand in the actual world, in which you killed a person in order to accomplish no actual good.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

If a certain kind of suffering is essential for heaven, say, then perhaps it is analogously justifiable for a person to have to go through it. But if there were no heaven, and no other good to play the same justificatory role, then that evil is unjustified as things actually stand. It might be perfectly well *justifiable* under other possible circumstances, say if heaven is waiting on us, but that doesn't help at all in a world where that justifying good does not actually obtain, as it wouldn't help the person who diverted the train from an empty track to one with a person on it.

Unjustifiable evils, if there be any, are different: their moral status does not change from world to world. There might for all we know be many different unjustifiable evils, or none at all, but this is their form: an unjustifiable evil is one such that there is no possible world in which an evil of that type has a sound justification, such that it ought to be allowed by a perfectly good being. A contingently unjustified evil, on the other hand, is one such that the evil lacks a justification in its own world, but very well has one in others. Accounting for differences among possibilities is an essential part of understanding what 'evil incompatible with God' means. An unjustifiable evil would be unjustified in every possible world in which that evil appears; a contingently unjustified evil would have no justification in its own world, though it could in others.

By an 'evil incompatible with God', then, I mean an evil that lacks an ultimate justification in either of these two ways. On the normal way of thinking about the problem of evil, it is actual evil that is under discussion in this way. Job wants an explanation for his actual suffering: "But I desire to speak with the almighty, and to

argue my case with God.”⁸⁸ Job is preoccupied with his actual suffering, and whether he has done anything to deserve it. Stories about other possibilities and what might be true under other conditions would surely be unsatisfying to him. But if we want to understand how justification works, consideration of other possibilities is enormously clarifying – sometimes justification of certain acts is simply impossible, and at other times justification is possible, but simply fails given the facts on the ground.

The problem of evil has become a modal problem already, beginning with J.L. Mackie’s claim of theistic inconsistency, and then more explicitly with the modal defense. The ontological problem of evil is an extension of that modalization of the problem. It allows us to ask what evil means for more of the concept of God than has traditionally been at stake. The definition above allows us to consider ‘evil incompatible with God’ in its modal dimensions as well.

My goal for the moment is just to clarify what I think the term ‘evil incompatible with God’ *means*: ‘meaningful’ and ‘metaphysically possible’ are not necessarily coextensive, but if the term has a clear meaning, it should help us to think about its possibility. I think that even the work of theodicy involves knowing the meaning of evil incompatible with God, and then trying to present accounts that avoid it. Theodicy would be rather pointless if we didn’t even know what evil incompatible with God *meant*. Who would carefully construct a theodicy would be a strange project if the terms that constituted the problem of evil amounted to semantic nonsense, to jabberwocky?

⁸⁸ Job 13:3.

Our fundamental question, however, is not merely one of meaning, but of metaphysical possibility:

1. If God exists, then God exists necessarily.
2. If God exists necessarily, then evil incompatible with God's existence is impossible.
3. Evil incompatible with God is *possible*.

Therefore, God does not exist.

So, is such evil metaphysically possible?

5. Possibility

The ontological problem of evil is an argument that God's existence is impossible, because the possibility of evil incompatible with God precludes the necessity of God, which is an essential attribute. The ontological problem of evil is an exercise in metaphysical modality: it is therefore metaphysical possibility that is at stake in the problem, and not logical, physical, or epistemic. This follows just from the nature of the question. We are asking whether God can necessarily exist, given the apparent possibilities that arise in the problem of evil, and the only kind of possibility that could conflict with God's necessary existence is a metaphysical possibility. What, then, is metaphysical possibility? And is evil incompatible with the perfections of God metaphysically possible?

We hit a dilemma at the outset: metaphysical possibility is either a primitive, or it is not. If it is not, the metaphysical possibility is grounded in something else, which we can hope to reason about. I will proceed on the assumption that metaphysical possibility is grounded in something deeper, though it might well be a metaphysical bedrock.

It cannot be the case both that God exists necessarily and that there is a possible state of affairs incompatible with God's existence. For if God is essentially a necessary being, then God's mere possibility would entail his necessary existence. If God is possible, then there is in some possible world a being who exists, by definition, in all possible worlds – including the actual world, critically, as well as

every other.⁸⁹ This is part of what it means to say that God is a necessary being. If God is possible, then God exists in all possible worlds. It follows from this that if God is possible, then unjustified evil is not, and if unjustified evil is possible, God is not.

Metaphysical possibility is therefore not mere logical possibility. 'God exists' and 'Evil incompatible with God exists' are both logically possible, as neither is explicitly contradictory, but one or the other must be metaphysically impossible, since the necessity of God would preclude the possibility of anything incompatible with his existence, and vice-versa. Logical possibility and metaphysical possibility are therefore distinct, and metaphysical possibility is not simple non-contradiction.

What then are possibilities? We should distinguish two questions:

- a) What is the nature of possibility?
- b) Which states of affairs are possible?

The second question is more important to the ontological problem of evil than the first question is. As functionalists in the philosophy of mind argue that what minds are made of matters less than what they do, I think that what possibilities are made of matters, at least for this problem, less than their form – i.e., what particular states of affairs they include, what propositions represent possibilities, and so on. You could say that the formal cause of possibility is more relevant to this argument than the material cause. If evil incompatible with the qualities of God is metaphysically possible, then the *substance* of that possibility, whether concrete and material or abstract and immaterial, is of secondary importance. Question (b) above is

⁸⁹ This presumes S5 modal logic, which is, I think, the right kind of modal logic to deal with the kind of necessary existence God is supposed to have.

ultimately the relevant one. If an unjustified evil is possible, then God does not exist, whether the substance of that possibility is a Lewisian world, an abstract proposition, a recombination of properties from the actual world, or something else entirely.

I do have my own strongly-held position on the substance of possibility, however, and as it may be that the answers to the two questions above are in some ways interdependent, it is worth spelling it out. In Armstrong's combinatorialism, for instance, the two questions are interdependent: the question of which states of affairs are possible is limited by the theoretical constraint that all possibilities be recombinations of actual individuals and properties. Such constraints might matter to this argument, though I doubt they in fact will: unjustified evil is not, *prima facie*, a particularly exotic possibility, and I suspect that each of the leading accounts of the nature of possibility has room within it to account for evil incompatible with God. What I hope to do, short of a complete defense of a theory of possibility against all rivals, is to sketch the outlines of what seems to me to be the most coherent account of the matter, to show what reasons lead me to that account, and to show that evil incompatible with God is easily explained within it. Parallel accounts could surely be given for other theories of possibility.

Briefly, I think that actualists have the *nature* of possibility right, but that this account must be supplemented with a version of combinatorialism, one divorced from Armstrong's materialism, to yield a helpful answer to the question of *which* states of affairs are possible. I see no compelling reason to think that combinatorialism must be tied to materialism in the first place, nor any compelling

reason to think that actualism ought not to borrow a combinatorial principle to help it flesh out a more precise answer to the question of which states of affairs are possible.

What then is the nature of possibility? One could be a *realist*, like David Lewis, and think that possibilities are worlds, just like this, but with no spatiotemporal relationship to this world:

The worlds are something like remote planets, except that most of them are much bigger than mere planets, and they are not remote. Neither are they nearby. They are not at any spatial distance whatever from here. ...[T]hey are not at any temporal distance whatever from now. They are isolated.⁹⁰

Spatiotemporal and causal relationships thus unify possible worlds (which Lewis usually just calls *worlds*), and distinguish them from one another.

This account grounds the meaning of modal language in something supposedly non-modal: worlds, just like this one, in infinite variety and recombination. The distinction between the modal status of this world and those other worlds is not absolute; actuality is relative, used to relate objects within a world to one another. A *world* is an object, just like our world is a very large spatiotemporal object, a *total* object, where every object within that world bears some spatiotemporal relation to every other object in that world. A particular possibility is thus just a part of, or a concrete object in, such a world. The actual world is just one world among many, with no special metaphysical status – other worlds are just as concrete.

Nor does this world differ from the others in its manner of existing. I do not have the slightest idea what a difference in manner of existing is supposed to be. Some things exist here on Earth, other things exist extraterrestrially,

⁹⁰ Lewis, David. *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell 1986. P. 2.

perhaps some exist no place in particular. But that is no difference in manner of existing. ... Likewise some things exist here at our world, others exist at other worlds.⁹¹

This account thus reduces modality, or perhaps eliminates it, in favor of the same “manner of existing” that the ordinary world has.

That is Lewis’s answer to question (a), then, about the *nature* of possibility: possibilities are worlds, concrete particulars of a certain completeness, with no spatiotemporal relationships to each other.

What, then, about question (b)? What is the *form* of possibility? Which worlds are possible? According to Lewis, every *way* a world can be is a way that some world is: Lewis subscribes to a principle of *plenitude*. The principle of plenitude, in Lewis’s telling, appeals to David Hume’s denial of necessary connections between things.

We need a way to say that there are possibilities enough, and no gaps in logical space. To which end, I suggest that we look to the Human denial of necessary connections between distinct existences. To express the plenitude of possible worlds, I require a *principle of recombination* ...⁹²

The denial of necessary connections between things means that anything can exist with anything else: the parts of our world, and the parts of any other world, can exist independently of one another in infinite recombinations. There may be physical regularities amongst the states of affairs in our world, but there are no metaphysically necessary connections. The scope of possibility is thus very broad – in his view, metaphysical possibility is as broad as logical possibility.

⁹¹ Lewis, pp. 2-3.

⁹² Lewis 87.

There are two independent elements to Lewis's account: *realism* and *plenitude*, the former an account of the nature of possibility, i.e., its material cause, and the latter an account of its form. I am suspicious of both, for different reasons, but the former more so than the latter. The motivation behind the realism is explanatory economy. Lewis believes that this account of possibility explains the modal – the 'possible' – in terms of the non-modal, as possibilities are simply 'worlds', fundamentally just as concrete as this world, though in their form different from this world in every possible way. Meaning can be explained as reference on this account: though the objects to which language about possibilities refer are strange and inaccessible, that language nevertheless refers to objects. I think that modality is thus not only reduced, but *eliminated*. References to possibilities are merely references to objects, with the modal differences between objects merely relative, akin to saying that they are in different places. To some, this may seem to be a virtue, but I think that it is a vice, leaving us less clear about the relationship between the possible and the necessary than we could otherwise be.

Lewis begins his account of modality with the assertion that he has not the slightest idea what a difference in "manner of existing" is supposed to be. I think that the entire purpose of a theory of modality is to give an account of differences in manners of existing – the possible, the necessary, the contingent are all precisely different manners, or *modes*, of existing. That is, at least, my conception of modality: modality is the metaphysical study of different manners of existing. One cannot accept Quine's dictum and still give an adequate account of modality. The reduction of the modal to the non-modal is less an account of the modal than an elimination of

it.⁹³ I am thus drawn to a theory of possibilities as immaterial, abstract entities, in large part just because it helps to explain the difference in “manner of existing” that I believe holds between the actual and the merely possible.

As for the form of possibility, the principle of *plenitude* seems easily to offer the resources to account for evil incompatible with a perfect being. If, for Humean reasons, metaphysical possibility is as broad as logical possibility, then evil incompatible with a perfect being surely exists in a great many worlds, as there is no logical contradiction in unjustified evil. Plenitude gives a Lewisian room for a great many states of affairs far removed from the actual world. Alien properties and objects, for one, could compound the problem of evil with the possibility of evils of types and intensity not found in the actual world:⁹⁴ kinds of suffering not found here, injustices for which we have only distant analogy, evils for which we have no words. A great many Lewisian worlds are surely a great deal worse than the actual. If they are not *mere* possibilities, not abstract entities, but rather possess the same concrete reality that this world does, then that fact adds layers to the problem of evil deeper even than those that arise in the ontological problem of evil. We would need yet another name for yet another form of the problem.

⁹³ I see no more difficulty in the notion that there are different types of existence than in the notion that there could be different types of mammals. There must be something they all have in common by virtue of which they are one type, but they nevertheless are different types of that one kind. The possible, the actual, et al, all *exist*, and so must have something in common, but there is no good reason to think that what they have in common is materiality.

⁹⁴ Lewis’s theory of possibility includes properties not found in the actual world. See Lewis 91-92.

This would be useful for my argument, but the usefulness of a theory for my own ends is no reason to accept it. I have objections to Lewis's account, apart from the immediate strangeness of the idea that all possible worlds are concrete realities. I have a problem, again, with the reduction of the modal to the non-modal. The replacement of modal language with language about concrete particulars is less a benefit than a cost to the theory, in my view. To deny that there is a significant metaphysical difference between the actual and the possible, or to claim that there is no difference in manners of existing, is to skirt precisely the question that a theory of possibility should answer.⁹⁵ If there simply *is* a metaphysical difference between the possible and the actual, as I think there is, then this reductionism has eliminated a real part of our metaphysical world.

There are further, more minor problems. It is impossible to explain identity across possible worlds on Lewis's account – he thinks that there is none, though he has an account of our language about such identities.⁹⁶ If we think that Aristotle could have been a politician, and that we would nevertheless be talking about the same Aristotle, then we cannot bind possibilities to individual worlds in this way.⁹⁷ Properties have, I think, an unsatisfying explanation on Lewis's account as well: to explain properties as sets of particulars is, I think, like the broader explanation of

⁹⁵ To be fair, he does offer *some* such an account, but one in terms of relativity: what is possible is what is in some other world, and what is in another world will vary from world to world. I do believe that there is a difference in the manners in which the actual and the possible exist, and I do not think that the difference is relative.

⁹⁶ Lewis, D. "Counterparts of Persons and Their Bodies." *Journal of Philosophy* 68: 203-11.

⁹⁷ Kripke, S. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press. 1980.

possibility, eliminative rather than elucidating.⁹⁸ The theoretical costs outweigh the benefits, especially if the benefits can be had in other ways. Quine's dictum, the claim that there is no difference between manners of existing,⁹⁹ seems to be the source of these problems as well: properties and counterfactual identities exist in a very different way than actual things do. I think the purpose of modal metaphysics is precisely to explain those differences.

We could instead be *actualists*, like Alvin Plantinga, and say instead that possibilities are *states of affairs*. States of affairs are abstract objects, akin to propositions, except that instead of being 'true' or 'false', they are actual, merely possible, necessary, or impossible.¹⁰⁰ All states of affairs exist, but in a different manner than concrete things do. This preserves a significant metaphysical distinction between the actual and the possible: actuality is not merely relative. This, I think, is a virtue.

The actualism in this account, i.e., the reason for the word, consists in the claim that all that exists is the actual: there are no mere possibilities, or states of affairs that do not exist, but could have. This is a paradoxical position, given that the point of the position is to account for the nature of possibility. Actualism is thus to be distinguished from *possibilism*, the view that there are possible objects, that possibilities are real in the broadest sense. Lewis is a possibilist, though his possibilism is *concretist*: possibilities are concrete particulars. Actualists are at pains

⁹⁸ Lewis, D. "New Work for a Theory of Universals." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 61: 343-377.

⁹⁹ Quine, W.V.O. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." *The Philosophical Review* (60) 1951: 20-43.

¹⁰⁰ Plantinga, A. *The Nature of Necessity*. Clarendon Press. 1979.

to distance themselves from the view that mere possibilities exist,¹⁰¹ though if one drops Quine's dictum and accepts the notion that there could be differences in modes of existence, I see no good reason to object to the view that mere possibilities do exist, just in a different manner than the actual, concrete world. This, at any rate, is how I would navigate the question of whether possibilities exist: accept the reality of mere possibilities, treat them, as the actualist does anyway, as abstract entities, and thereby explain the differences between modes of existence. Possible states of affairs are abstract, and actual states of affairs are concrete; possibilities thus have a very different kind of existence than concrete particulars have. Possibilities are themselves necessary,¹⁰² where actuality is contingent. Possibilities are atemporal, where actuality is spatiotemporal. There are, in my view, all sorts of differences in manners of existing between the possible and the actual. The seriousness of the 'actualism' in particular actualists' own thinking has always been questionable, anyway. Alvin Plantinga, for one, surely *means* that possible worlds exist, whatever distinction between the actual and the possible he might otherwise want to draw: he in fact thinks that possible worlds are necessary beings!¹⁰³

I think that possible worlds exist, which might mean that we ought to call this a kind of *possibilism*, though not in Lewis's sense, as they are not concrete particulars. A possibility is an abstract object. A possible world is a maximal object

¹⁰¹ See, e.g., Adams, R. "Theories of Actuality," *Nous* 8: 211-231; McMichael, A. "A New Actualist Modal Semantics," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 12: 73-99; Plantinga, A. "Actualism and Possible Worlds." *Theoria* 42: 139-60.

¹⁰² Possibilities are necessarily possible; if they were not, then they might be impossible, which would mean they *were* impossible.

¹⁰³ See, e.g., Plantinga, A. "Actualism and Possible Worlds." *Theoria* 42: 139-160. 1976.

of this kind, a maximal state of affairs, or total way things could be. Individual states of affairs consist of objects and properties, which may or may not obtain. Possible objects, as opposed to properties, need to be explained; we may need haecceities in our ontology to play that role. Something, at least, must be added to a set of properties, like *being a purple horse*, to yield a state of affairs, like *Domino is a purple horse*.

We started with two questions: what is the nature of possibility, and what is its form? The nature of possibility, for an actualist, is explained: possibilities are abstract entities, not concrete particulars. So far, I agree. What, then, is the form of possibility? Which states of affairs are possible? And the basic question for this work: is evil incompatible with God possible? Possibilities are akin to propositions on this theory, so one might approach the question logically, and treat states of affairs as possible if they are noncontradictory, but this won't work, for there are necessary propositions as well, which are also noncontradictory, and there are apparent metaphysical impossibilities which are logically possible. The wooden table made of ice is metaphysically impossible, but logically possible. Either God or evil incompatible with God is logically impossible, but both are logically possible.

I agree with the actualist on the nature of possibility. Now, the more pressing question: which states of affairs are possible? Alvin Plantinga's frustratingly empty answer is that a state of affairs is possible if it is possible that it *obtain*.¹⁰⁴ Alright: which states of affairs are such that it is possible (rather than impossible, perhaps,

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

or necessary) that they obtain? That won't quite do. We need a more illuminating answer.

Combinatorialism is a third option, which could be taken as a theory of the nature of possibility, or as theory of its form. As a theory of the nature of possibility, I think it is deeply flawed. In David Armstrong's formulation, combinatorialism is metaphysically conservative, in that it grounds possibility in elements of the actual world:

I take it that *combinatorially constructible* is readily intelligible on the intuitive level at least. There are no unicorns, but unicorns are combinatorially constructible from things that do exist: horses, horns, and so on.¹⁰⁵

The notion that possibilities must be formed only from elements of the actual world gives Armstrong's combinatorialism a more restrictive answer to the question of which states of affairs are possible than that given by Lewis, for whom the range of possibility is a *plenitude*, or by an actualist, for whom it might be a plenitude as well for all we know.

I don't share the belief that possibility is tied to the actual. Perhaps there is a *kind* of possibility that ought to be so restricted, but I doubt strongly that it is a metaphysically deep kind of possibility, and it is largely inapplicable to the conversations about possibility that arise in the philosophy of religion. Armstrong himself even rejected it in his later works,¹⁰⁶ accepting the possibility of alien properties and objects, though his earlier views are still what people usually mean by *combinatorialism*. Metaphysical possibility, I think, includes not only

¹⁰⁵ Armstrong, D. *Truth and Truthmakers*, p. 86. Cambridge University Press. 2004.

¹⁰⁶ Armstrong, p. 87

recombinations of the actual, but alternatives to it. If it is possible, as I believe it is, that there be more or fewer things,¹⁰⁷ or possible that there be things fundamentally unlike anything in the actual world in their properties or particulars,¹⁰⁸ then we need a broader account of possibility than Armstrong's combinatorialism provides.

The *virtue* of combinatorialism, on the other hand, is its specificity. The combinatorialist has the resources to say precisely which states of affairs are possible, and in what their possibility consists. This is what is lacking, I think, in Plantinga's "a state of affairs is possible if it is possible that it obtains." A combinatorialist can discern the possible from the impossible in a more nuanced way: a state of affairs is possible if it consists of a compatible set of properties. The combinatorialist seems, I think, to have the material cause of possibility wrong, but the formal cause of possibility roughly right. What *is* a possibility? I think it is an abstract entity, a combination of properties-as-universals in the Platonic sense, rather than a recombination of elements of the actual world. *Which* states of affairs are possible? Possibilities are roughly those states of affairs consisting of compatible combinations of properties and particulars.

Combinatorialism would have to be unmoored from the materialist foundations Armstrong gave it to be paired with actualism in this way. So why not do so? Lewis did: his plenitude rests on a combinatorial principle, underpinned by Hume's denial of necessary connections between things:

¹⁰⁷ See, e.g., Armstrong, D. *A World of States of Affairs*. CUP 1997.

¹⁰⁸ Armstrong, D. "The Nature of Possibility." *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16(4): 575-594.

To express the plenitude of possible worlds, I require a *principle of recombination* according to which patching together parts of different possible worlds yields another possible world.¹⁰⁹

If a concrete materialist who believes in a plurality of concrete worlds with alien properties and the like can borrow the combinatorial principle, so can an actualist.

This gives us a constructive way to tell whether a specific state of affairs – say, an evil incompatible with God – is possible: can the properties, particulars, and so on, that make it up be combined into one state of affairs? Not all *logical* combinations can be *metaphysically* combined: one object cannot have the property of being both two and ten grams;¹¹⁰ one object cannot be completely composed of both water and steel. To say that possibility is combinatorial, then, is not a trivial matter of saying that every set of properties generates a possibility. One object cannot have the property both of being a person and not being a person. One object cannot be both circular and triangular. I would rather say that the latter two properties *cannot* be combined into one particular than say that they are an ‘impossible combination’, for I think they are no combination at all – they cannot be combined. In this sense, the combinatorialist is right: every *combination* of properties generates a possibility, but not every set of properties is a genuine combination. The property of being completely water and the property of being completely steel cannot be combined in one object, and so they are not a genuine combination. But why can they not be combined?

¹⁰⁹ Lewis 87.

¹¹⁰ I chose this, rather than, say, “red and green all over”, because mass is a primary property. Secondary properties, like weight, might look incompatible when they’re not.

The logically impossible combination above, i.e., the object that is both a person and not a person, is obviously also metaphysically impossible. But not all metaphysical impossibilities need be logically impossible. I do not think that the impossibility of an object made completely of both steel and water is *logical*: it is metaphysical. No one object could have both the properties of being made of steel and of being made of water. Why not? I think this is so because such an object would have no *form*. A genuine combination of properties generates a form, and an impossible combination does not. This is how I think we can tell whether a state of affairs is metaphysically possible: a genuine combination of properties has a form; a set of properties that has no form is not a genuine possibility. They would not be a genuine combination.

So a genuine metaphysical possibility, a combination of properties, will have some form, where some *logical* combinations of properties do not, and are therefore metaphysically impossible. An impossible state of affairs will mimic a combination, like the wooden table made of ice, but on closer examination will have no determinate form.¹¹¹ Its qualities will preclude each other, because they cannot give the particular object that has them a shape, or a nature, and if an object has no nature, it is not an object. Similarly, one object cannot be completely composed of two different material causes (one spearhead cannot be completely composed of two different lumps of iron): one object needs one material cause. A state of affairs has a substance and a form, composed of particulars and properties, and if some

¹¹¹ To betray my Platonist tendencies a bit further, the *form* of a state of affairs might include its moral attributes.

purported state of affairs lacks one of these elements, it is not possible. Hence the impossibility of the wooden table made of ice: it has, depending on whether wood and ice are forms of matter or substances in their own right, either two forms in one object, or one object made of two substances. (I would describe it the former way.)

If a state of affairs is *hylomorphic*, consisting of both a material cause and a formal cause, or an object with properties, then both the *hyle* and the *morphe* play an essential role in whether a set of words even describes a genuine state of affairs. Combinatorialism helps to characterize the form of a state of affairs, but when there is a question of whether some language describes a genuine possibility, those hylomorphic elements help to answer the question. If a substance has a form, then the combination of properties is a genuine combination, and characterizes a possibility. So possibilities are abstract entities, i.e., states of affairs, where states of affairs themselves are combinations of properties. The question 'Is X a possible state of affairs?' amounts to asking whether the properties referred to by the proposition can be combined into some set of particulars, thus generating a state of affairs with a particular form. Some properties cannot be so combined – being both two and ten kilograms, being a wooden table made of ice, etc. If the properties in the proposition are compatible and yield a determinate form, then the proposition describes a metaphysical possibility.

Metaphysical possibility is not grounded in logical possibility, because we do not appeal to a principle of non-contradiction to explain incompatible properties. In fact, incompatible properties explain why some states of affairs seem contradictory, when they are not logically so. The wooden table that is made of ice contains no

explicit contradiction, no word that is asserted and denied, but it seems contradictory all the same, because it involves properties that cannot be combined, because they have no form. The apparent contradiction is explained by appeal to the incompatible properties, rather than the other way around. Like Euthyphro's holiness, the table seems contradictory because its properties are incompatible, rather than the table's properties seeming incompatible because the linguistic description of it is contradictory. The contradiction in language follows from the metaphysical impossibility, given a correct understanding of what the table's properties are, and the correct description that therefore follows from them.¹¹²

The difference between my account and Armstrong's, then, is twofold: (a) I think that states of affairs are abstract, rather than grounded in the elements of the actual world; and (b) I think the range of possibility is therefore broader than Armstrong can explain. For the purposes of the ontological problem of evil, it might not much matter, as the properties of the actual world ought to be sufficient to account for the possibilities of evil incompatible with God. If the actual world is not bad enough to do so, then surely some recombination of the actual could make things worse. But as a theory of what properties are, I see no reason to assume that all properties are at some point instantiated in the actual world, as properties are here only supposed to ground *possibility*, not actuality. If we ask what properties themselves are, I think it makes much more sense to say that they are abstract

¹¹² One could think that impossibility of the wooden table made of ice is a matter of one object being totally comprised of two *substances*, rather than of one object having two forms (and thus no determinate form). I would not quibble either way, though I think of 'steel' and 'water' as forms matter takes, rather than as substances in themselves – hence my construal of the problem.

entities, universals in the Platonic tradition, than to say that they are essentially grounded in and limited by what we find in the actual world. Properties are, I think, not particulars, but universals, and the notion that universals should be grounded in the empirical world just confuses the matter as to what universals are.

So the *nature* of possibility is best accounted for by a theory like Plantinga's actualism; the question of *which* things are possible and why is best accounted for by a kind of combinatorialism. Possibility is broader than Armstrong was able to explain, and Lewis's principle of plenitude is *roughly* right, though with limits: there are logically possible states of affairs that are not metaphysically possible. Some logically compatible properties simply cannot be combined in one state of affairs, or one particular, and so are not genuine combinations. The properties involved in the combinatorial process depends on what properties there are – e.g., on whether only actualized properties are real, or whether there are uninstantiated properties, and unactualized objects. I tend strongly towards the latter view. There could have been more or fewer things, or alien properties, contra Armstrong. We can explain this, without accepting the strangeness and eliminativism of Lewisian realism, and without Armstrong's reductionist belief that properties are somehow tied to the empirical world, if we think of possibilities as abstract, but nevertheless *real*, states of affairs, where states of affairs are combinations of properties with a determinate substance and form – objects with properties.

We need a few more pieces. A combinatorial theory of possibility says that possibilities are combinations of properties, or of particulars and properties, which can be added to and subtracted from each other: these combinations are the

metaphysical possibilities. But we may need a few more elements in our ontology of possibility to complete the picture. David Armstrong argues that a set of qualities that is not instantiated into a particular cannot yet exist; nor can there be bare particulars, empty of properties.¹¹³ These two additions give him an early-Wittgensteinian¹¹⁴ model, in the tradition of the *Tractatus*: “The world consists of facts, not things.” A possibility, for Armstrong, is a combination of particulars and properties, an ‘a is F’, whereas a possibility for Leibniz is just a combination of properties. Both a particular and a universal are essential, Armstrong argues, because a particular without a universal would not be an actual state of affairs, nor would a universal that is not instantiated in a particular. A possible state of affairs, as opposed to a mere property, involves a particular, or set of them, that has properties.

What ontological element plays the role of particulars? Perhaps particulars are individuated by substances; perhaps by haecceities.¹¹⁵ I tend to the former view rather than the latter, because haecceities are properties, and I think that properties are universals, where whatever makes something a particular ought not to be a universal. Perhaps I am being unfair to properties in thinking that none of them could be particulars, but that at any rate points me to substances, some of which are perhaps unactualized, as better candidates for particularity. If Leibniz’s principle of the identity of indiscernibles is right, there could be no two objects that share every property – no two spheres, electrons, etc., that are exactly alike. The addition of

¹¹³ Armstrong, D. *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility*. CUP. 1999.

¹¹⁴ It could also be described as Aristotelian, for that matter.

¹¹⁵ Plantinga, A. “Actualism and Possible Worlds.” *Theoria* 42: 139-160. 1976.

particulars to one's ontology solves the problem: the two spheres have all of their properties in common (perhaps apart from their haecceities, if particularity is haecceity), but differ in the fact that those properties are instantiated in different particulars. Take the possibility in which Caesar was a housepainter. This is a combination, on Armstrong's picture, of a particular and a property. But what is the particular in Caesar, behind his properties? Could Caesar just be a combination of properties, such that 'Caesar is a housepainter' is properties all the way down, with no bare particular behind them? What entity is left to serve as the particular?

My answer, again, is that the particular is the *substance* in which Caesar's qualities inhere, whether those qualities include being a general or a housepainter. This fits the hylomorphic view of states of affairs given above. 'General' does not describe a complete state of affairs the way that 'Caesar is a general' does. So a possibility is not *only* a combination of properties in some form: a possibility is a combination of properties that give form to some particular. We need something, substances, to play the role of particulars.

We also need one more element, which ought to be a part of any account of possibility: we need a way to deal with negative states of affairs, i.e. those concerning what is *not* the case. In the context of the larger problem of this work, we need a way to account for what is not included in some possibility. The idea that a possible world is a total description of a maximal state of affairs is intended, in part, to accomplish this: it is a way to say that we have described all of that world, and therefore that anything that is not included in that description is not a part of that world.

To say that unjustified evil is possible, then, is to say that there is some combination of particulars and universals that together constitute an evil, together with a *negative fact*, to the effect that there is no further state of affairs that justifies that evil. We require negative facts in our ontology to serve as the truthmakers for, or to explain the truth of, propositions about what does not exist. Armstrong deals with negative facts by appeal to the notion of a totality fact: when all of the facts about a possible world have been listed, we add the totality fact ‘These are *all* the states of affairs’ to serve as the truthmaker for all of the truths about what is *not* in that world.¹¹⁶ There are a number of other ways one can deal with negative facts, say, by the postulation of absences or the Epicurean void, but one must have some way of dealing with negative facts, on pain of every possible world containing every possible state of affairs.

The possibility of unjustified evil therefore amounts to the conjunction of the particulars and universals that make up some given evil, together with the negative fact that there are no *other* states of affairs in that world that would justify this particular evil. There are no mysteries to be revealed, no greater goods that would justify it in a consequentialist way, no hidden defeaters for the evil, etc.: this is entailed by the possibility of a totality fact on top of the evil itself. Evils can take a great many forms, and so the evils themselves generate a great many possibilities, given the account of metaphysical possibility above: evils certainly *have* forms, and so there are certainly a great many possible evils to serve as fuel for the ontological problem of evil. The metaphysical possibility of evils much worse than those in the

¹¹⁶ Armstrong, D. *Truth and Truthmakers*, pp. 55-67 CUP. 2004.

actual world is surely not in doubt. Their form is easy enough to comprehend. The moral conclusion that they are incompatible with God can come, I think, from either of two directions, as outlined in the last chapter. They could be contingently unjustified, such that no greater good justifies them; this can be accounted for simply by those evils and a totality fact, such that there are no further goods in that world that justify the evil, or they could be unjustifiable, such that no further states of affairs could matter, because none could in principle justify them. These states of affairs consist of recognizable properties in an easily comprehensible form: they are possible.

An account of possibility ought not to beg the question for or against the existence of God. Armstrong's account, for instance, in grounding all possibility in the properties and particulars of the actual world, seems to beg the question against the existence of God from the outset, as God ought to be able to make worlds fundamentally different than this, and such worlds are precluded by Armstrong's combinatorialism. An account of possibility as, say, thoughts in the mind of God, as Brian Leftow has recently offered,¹¹⁷ clearly begs the question *for* the existence of God. The account I have offered does neither: it grounds possibility in independent metaphysical entities, i.e., abstract properties, particulars, and negative facts, which together can account for both the power of God and the problem of evil, account for our ordinary intuitions about why the wooden table cannot be made of ice, and allow us to address the ontological problem of evil in a fair and detached way.

¹¹⁷ Leftow, B. *God and Necessity*. OUP. 2015.

I think that the larger argument does not hang on my particular account of possibility, though, because I suspect that unjustified evil can be accounted for by just about *any* non-question-begging account of possibility. Unjustified evil is not a wooden table made of ice. It is not exotic. It is a state of affairs involving no obviously incompatible properties. Metaphysical impossibilities are, as I argued above, *formally* impossible, in that the properties involved generate an object with no form. The book that is both ten and twenty kilograms has no form. Evil incompatible with God has a form – the myriad forms evil ordinarily takes, recombined, deepened, intensified. Why think that evil could not be infinitely worse than it is? Why think it could not take forms we have no words for, worse than any we have in our world? I have offered two ways to characterize it, unjustified and unjustifiable, but I by no means think that these are the *only* two ways to characterize evil incompatible with God. It surely comes in infinite variety and exceeds our ability to imagine.

I would put to someone who thinks such evils are impossible to explain why, without begging the question for the existence of God. I am skeptical that anyone has the “burden of proof”, because we all do, but I do think the claim that such evil is metaphysically impossible ought to be counted unlikely on its face, given the long and difficult history involved in trying to justify all of the evil in *this* world. An infinite variety of further possible worlds extends that difficulty as far as the range of possibility reaches.

7. Two Historical Advances in Possibility

The virtues of the account of possibility given above can, I think, be illustrated briefly by comparison with some historical antecedents. Since at least Aristotle we have had the concept of possibility as an alternative to actuality,¹¹⁸ alongside a more restricted *temporal* notion of possibility, according to which everything possible is actual at some point in time; possibility is thus tied to actuality, as in Armstrong.¹¹⁹ This temporal sense of possibility is no longer current, but the drive in some accounts to tie possibility to the actual world mirrors its motivations, I think. On this temporal view, the ‘necessary’ is just what exists eternally. Boethius, for instance, adopts this account.¹²⁰ A broader conception of possibility, involving states of affairs that were never actual, was available in antiquity as well. But as with Armstrong’s empiricism, this temporal account *anchors* possibility in the actual world: what is at some point in time is *possible*; what always exists is *necessary*, which just means *eternal*; what never exists in *impossible*.

This temporal notion of possibility is, however, far too narrow to capture much of what we mean by the metaphysically possible. It fails to do some of the work we need a conception of possibility to do. I will never have a paternal aunt, as

¹¹⁸ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics VI.3*. In *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Princeton, 1984.

¹¹⁹ Lewis arguably does so as well: other worlds, for Lewis, are not spatiotemporally related to the actual world, but he is compelled to give them the same concreteness. This may ultimately spring from the same motive to somehow tie possibility to the actual.

¹²⁰ Boethius, *In Periherm.* I.120–1, 200–201.

my father's only sibling was his brother, Roy, but it makes little sense to say that Carl Brownson's paternal aunt is metaphysically impossible. Such a person will never exist, but one *could have*.

Possibility as an alternative to actuality broadens the domain of the possible, and semantically captures the kind of possibility relevant to the philosophy of religion. God is not constrained by the actual world, as he created it, and presumably could have done otherwise, as he is free. He created the actual world from amongst a set of alternatives. An account of possibility as alternatives to the actual captures the meaning of religious language about these matters in a way that accounts of possibility grounded in actuality do not.

Both accounts of possibility – temporal possibility and possibility as alternatives to actuality – are in play in medieval thought. Aquinas uses the temporal account of the possible, for instance, in his Third Way: 'that which is possible not to be at some point is not' is a premise of the argument.¹²¹ Robert Grosseteste offers a nuance on this position by distinguishing between necessity *per se* and *per accidens*: what is necessary *per se* is necessary because of a connection between subject and predicate, while what is necessary *per accidens* has no such connection, and is merely accidentally eternal.¹²² This seems to suggest that the nonexistence of what is necessary *per accidens* is possible in a way in which the nonexistence of what is necessary *per se* is not; if so, then 'necessary *per accidens*' is

¹²¹ Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologica*. Part I, Q.2, A3. Trans. L Shapcote. Benziger 1911.

¹²² Grosseteste, R. In *The first Recension of Robert Grosseteste's De Libero Arbitrio*. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. 1991.

a lesser form of necessity. In Grosseteste, as in Armstrong, possibility is tied to the actual, and necessary to the eternal, but if what is necessary *per accidens* is *less necessary* than what is necessary *per se*, we probably ought not to call the former metaphysical necessity. That which is possible is not that which is at some time true, but that the nonexistence of which is not necessary *per se*. This gives us a way to conceive of possibility that involves not just the actual world, but alternatives to it.

Peter Abelard accepts unactualized counterfactuals,¹²³ as does John duns Scotus, who further treats them as primary metaphysical facts.¹²⁴ These are accounts of possibilities which are *not* tied to actuality, but are rather alternatives to it, and thus have the resources to explain why those states of affairs Grosseteste would call ‘necessary *per accidens*’ are in fact not necessary at all: their nonexistence is metaphysically possible, where that possibility amounts to unrealized counterfactuals. God, on this account, knows these possibilities independently of himself, in a way perhaps parallel to the way that Euthyphro finally realized that the gods know holiness independently of themselves.¹²⁵ For duns Scotus, possibilities are themselves *necessary*, though their actualization is of course contingent; possible states of affairs, as in Plantinga’s actualism, are in some sense necessary beings. This, if right, incidentally entails that an ontological disproof of Findlay’s

¹²³ See Martin, J. “Abelard on Modality: Some Possibilities and Some Puzzles.” In Gabbay, D. and Woods, J. *Medieval and Renaissance Logic*. North Holland 2008.

¹²⁴ John duns Scotus, *Ord.* I.35, 32.

¹²⁵ Plato, *Euthyphro*. Ed. Gallop, D. OUP. 1999. Pp. 9-10.

type must fail, even if *God's* necessity is impossible, as other necessary beings – possibilities themselves – are possible.¹²⁶

Much of philosophical theology is semantically meaningless if there are no metaphysically possible alternatives to the actual world. I think that this account simply captures what possibility is better than an account grounded in the actual world could: I see no reason to ground possibility in actuality, as nothing about the actual world itself is metaphysically necessary. It follows that there is no compelling reason to say that possibility must be restricted to, or tied very deeply at all, to the actual.

Abelard suggested that there are unrealized counterfactuals, and then there are mere imaginables, which might exist in thought, but not in reality: a fine distinction we might aim at imaginable but perhaps impossible “zombies” in the philosophy of mind. Suppose we agree. How then do we discern the metaphysically possible from the merely imaginable?

As I outlined in the last chapter, I think that a version of combinatorialism is the answer. Leibniz's principle of the indiscernibility of identicals tells us that if A and B are identical, then every property of A is also a property of B.¹²⁷ This half of Leibniz's law can help us to distinguish not only actualities, but *possibilities*: if a single property of the complete concept of a particular giraffe was different than it actually is, then we would have, Leibniz argues, a different possibility – not a

¹²⁶ Scotus points out in the *Dialectica* that if the antecedent of a true conditional is necessary, then its consequence is also necessary. So, if God is a necessary being, and if the proposition 'If God exists, then there is no unjustified evil' is true, then 'There is no unjustified evil' ought to be a necessary truth.

¹²⁷ Leibniz, G.W. *Discourse on Metaphysics*. Hackett. 1991.

different *actual* giraffe, but an alternative possibility. We can *identify* possibilities in this way: they are unique combinations of properties, suitably accounting, as addressed in the last chapter, for the fact that some properties cannot be combined into one form. Distinct possibilities are distinct forms, where forms are combinations of more elemental properties. We need not believe with Leibniz that every property is *essential*, but we can borrow from Leibniz the idea that possibilities can be distinguished from each other qualitatively. When a property differs, we have a different possibility. The state of affairs in which a property of an object is different from those had by the object in the actual world is not describing another actuality, but another possibility, consisting of a set of properties that does not quite match this actual one.

Leibniz's Law is not in itself the principle I would adopt to distinguish possibilities, but it nevertheless represents a historical advance in that it offers a way to identify particular possibilities, and therefore to distinguish them from one another. We need not adopt Leibniz's particular formula to borrow the idea that possibilities can be identified and distinguished by their properties: this is the basis of combinatorialism. Leibniz's Law is thus a forerunner of Armstrong's combinatorial theory of possibility, and is all the more reason to think that 'combinatorialism' need not be committed to Armstrong's particular constraints – his materialism, his grounding of possibility in the actual world, etc.

A qualitative account of possibility of this kind allows us not only to distinguish various possibilities from each other, but to describe them *completely*, which is exactly what we need if we are to have an answer to the questions of this

broader work. A theory of possibility ought to be able to tell us, to borrow Abelard's term, which of two 'imaginables' is actually possible, whether God or an evil incompatible with God, if, as it happens, they cannot both be metaphysically possible. Leibniz's account of possibilities as combinations of properties helps to judge the case between them in a disinterested way.

My argument, and my reason for this very brief historical survey, apart from curiosity's sake, is that I think that some of the positions here represent genuine metaphysical discoveries. I think that there is more to say to clarify what makes properties compatible, what makes a description of a state of affairs complete, and so on; the last chapter is my account of possibility. But here I want to stress that the question of whether possibility is grounded in the actual world is not new, and the longevity of the question attests to its importance. The temporal account of possibility in Boethius and Aquinas ties metaphysical possibility to the empirical world in much the same way that Armstrong's combinatorialism does, and medieval critics then showed why that account is too narrow. The idea that possibility might include fundamental alternatives to actuality, that there is nothing particularly metaphysically deep or necessary about the actual world, is not new: it is in Abelard and John duns Scotus, among many others, long before Hume denied necessary connections between distinct existents. The question of how to discern which states of affairs are possible is not new: Leibniz's law points towards how to answer to that question. The "advances" alluded to in the title of this chapter are that possibility is not grounded in actuality, and that possibilities are combinations of properties (or properties and particulars); these arguments allowed us to explain more about the

nature of modality than their alternatives did. The idea that metaphysical possibility, the range of all possible worlds, extends far beyond the constraints of the actual world, is not a twentieth-century innovation. The roots of the possibilities that underlie the ontological problem of evil extend far into the past.

7. The Possibility of Evil Incompatible with God

I will borrow a case from Ivan Karamazov, to model the possibility of unjustified evil.

One day a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the general's favorite hound. 'Why is my favorite dog lame?' He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog's paw. 'So you did it.' The general looked the child up and down. 'Take him.' He was taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock-up. It's a gloomy, cold, foggy, autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry. 'Make him run,' commands the general. 'Run! run!' shout the dog-boys. The boy runs. 'At him!' yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes. I believe the general was afterwards declared incapable of administering his estates.¹²⁸

The evil is nuanced: the general makes the child's mother watch. The evil is inflicted on a *child* in the first place. The depravity of the general, the depth of the emptiness in him, is vivid.

An evil, I suggested two chapters ago, could be incompatible with God in either of two ways: it could be *unjustifiable*, i.e., an evil of a type such that no greater good could ever justify it, or it could be merely *unjustified*, contingently, such that an evil of that type might be morally justifiable under other conditions (in another possible world, say), but as things stand nothing actually justifies the evil in question. Does this case, or perhaps a similar one suitably modified, meet either condition?

¹²⁸ Dostoevsky, F. *The Brothers Karamazov*. In Pojman, L. and Rea, M. *The Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Cengage. 2015. Pp. 243-249.

Ivan Karamazov's murdered child is a plausible candidate for an *unjustifiable* evil. Ivan thinks of the case this way: if heaven itself, he suggests, depended on the murder of this one child, and you could build heaven on those grounds, you should reject it. If he is right, if this evil is unjustifiable, then God is impossible. Suppose that this evil *can* be justified, however: that heaven is worth it, and that goods await which will, to borrow Roderick Chisholm's term, *defeat* this evil – not merely outweigh it, but change its very nature and rob it of its unacceptability.¹²⁹ This is hard for me to imagine or accept, even as a possibility, but suppose that there is some such possible good. Then we turn to the possibility that this evil be not unjustifiable, but merely *unjustified*: is it metaphysically possible that there be a world without these goods, without these defeaters? All that is required for such a world is that same evil, together with a negative fact: the absence of the good that justifies it.

There is no barrier to there being two worlds: one with the evil and the good that justifies it, and one with the evil, but without the good that justifies it. And if God is supposed to be a necessary being, then it is only the latter world that matters towards our resolution of the question. It is clear enough that events of the type described in Dostoevsky's story actually happen. How does the expansion of the problem to the realm of the merely possible change things? Are there worse states of affairs in the realm of the possible than there are in the actual world?

¹²⁹ Chisholm, R. "The Defeat of Good and Evil." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. Vol 42. 1968.

I think the answer to this question is an obvious *yes*: things could be worse than they are. They could also likely be a lot better. The story modeled above shows one way in which this could be so: suppose we live in a world in which all evil is justified consequentially, in terms of some greater good, or justified by some further fact waiting on us that defeats the evil. The possible can be worse than the actual simply by starting with the actual world and its evils, and eliminating those goods that defeat it. The account of possibility sketched in the last chapter can account for this: it involves only states of affairs we have in the actual world, together with a negative fact – the absence of those goods that would justify them. The evil and the good are two independent events, and there is nothing metaphysically impossible in having the former without the latter.

Consider now whether evils themselves could be worse than they actually are. Evil is, as it stands in the actual world, bad enough – it is hard to imagine worse than Ivan Karamazov’s stories. But couldn’t the particular forms of evil – say suffering, or injustice – be worse? Could suffering, in some possible world, be eternal, for instance, or deeper than it is here? Could there be evils that consist of David Lewis’s alien properties: simply of a *type* that we do not find in and could not combinatorially construct from the actual world, and for which we have no name, though we might recognize them as evil?

The suffering of the child, the distinct suffering of his mother, the cruelty and sadism of the general: these are not “alien” properties. If properties unlike those in the actual world are possible, the scope of the problem opens wider. And if there are no alien properties, the scope of the problem *still* opens wide, in that the severity

and extremity of the evils we actually have could surely be recombined in worse forms than they take here. What is the worst possible world? Is even that consistent with the goodness of God? If there is no worst world, is that not itself a worse scenario?

The question, then, is whether somewhere amongst all possible worlds there is anything unjustifiable or unjustified. These two words map onto two different, influential ways of thinking about moral justification: a deontological way and a consequentialist way. Surely these two ways do not exhaust how we might think about justification in the problem of evil, but they are two good ways to build models, which we might extrapolate to similar cases involving different principles.

Take the case of the child killed by the general in front of his mother. Presume for the sake of argument that this evil is justifiable, given goods in heaven that depend on that evil, but also that it is possible that those goods not obtain – they are not metaphysical necessities, after all, but depend, let us say, on the free will of God. It is possible for this evil to exist without the good that justifies it; they are separate events. Given the consequentialist account of justification, this evil is justifiable, and perhaps even actually justified, but it is also metaphysically possible that the evil *not* be justified, for the greater good that justifies it is a separate event that need not obtain. Unjustified evil is therefore possible. God is therefore not necessary, and since necessity is essential to God, God does not exist.

Suppose instead that the consequentialist is wrong about how justification works, and that there are acts that simply cannot be justified by greater goods, acts not subject to utilitarian calculations. We have in this the grounds of another model

of an evil incompatible with God: an unjustifiable evil. If the general's murder of the child is unjustifiable no matter what good comes of it, no matter what other facts obtain, then the rest of the description of the world doesn't matter: God does not exist. If unjustifiable evil of that kind is metaphysically possible, then the rest of the facts of the world in question are irrelevant. If, on the other hand, everything is subject to utilitarian calculation, then we are thrown back into the argument of the paragraph above. The impossibility of God can be explained either way.

A possible world is a large possibility – a maximal combination, or a complete description of a world, which means in part that it includes negative facts about what is not the case in that world. Could the general's murder of the child, then, be an unjustified evil? Could a complete description of a world include an evil like that or worse, without also including some good that justifies it? Why not? The wooden table made of ice is impossible. But an evil without a justifying good contains no incompatible properties, no contradictions, nothing to recommend it as more unusual than, say, the state of affairs in which Aristotle is a politician rather than a philosopher. It has a form. It would be far morally suspect to say that a horrendous evil *had* a justification than to say that it lacked one, at least so it seems to me.

Start with a world in which the murdered child exists, but some justification of that evil exists as well; now subtract the justification. A child is torn apart by dogs in front of his mother, but since free will might justify the evil in W_1 , let us turn instead to W_2 , in which the evil was caused instead by wild dogs. But since other people learn a valuable enough moral lesson in W_2 to justify this evil in that world, let us turn instead to W_3 , in which no greater good comes of it. Let us add to this last

world a *totality fact*, such that we now have a complete description of that world, and no more justifications of the evil can sneak in.¹³⁰ We now have an evil incompatible with God.

But we haven't really put our theory of possibility to work yet. For suppose that God is possible. If God is possible, then he exists necessarily, which means unjustified evils like those above are impossible. If we were to naively ask the man on the street whether both God and unjustified evil were possible, he would likely say yes to both. The answer, as we know, cannot be yes to both. They are mutually exclusive possibilities.

So, is God possible? Gödel, following Leibniz, thought the question was combinatorial, in the sense that the possibility of God is simply the combination of all positive qualities in one being.¹³¹ But the possibility of God is the possibility of a *necessary being*: if God is possible, then there is a possible being that makes anything incompatible with it *impossible*. This is a strange notion, and we should look at it carefully.

If God is possible, then there is a combination of particulars and universals that would make *other possibilities impossible*. I think that consequence ought to be stated in exactly this contradictory form: God would render possibilities impossible, and that he cannot do. Other combinations of properties and particulars which are internally consistent and compatible would then not be possible, i.e., would not be

¹³⁰ Armstrong, D. *Truth and Truthmakers*. CUP. 2004. See especially chapter 5..

¹³¹ Gödel, K. "Ontological Proof". *Collected Works: Unpublished Essays & Lectures, Volume III*. pp. 403–404. Oxford University Press. 1995.

combinations of properties and particulars, etc. But they are. What could it mean to say they are not? These states of affairs have forms; substances could take those forms. To say that God makes other possibilities impossible is absurd: these states of affairs *are* possible, since they are combinations of properties and particulars; they have recognizable forms.

Further, possibilities are themselves necessary, so these possibilities God would render impossible are *necessarily* possible: it is impossible to render the possible impossible. If this sounds like we have hit bedrock, we have: possibilities are not subject to dismissal if they conflict with theology. They are as deeply grounded and philosophically important as Platonic forms; I think, perhaps controversially, that they *are* Platonic forms, or combinations of them. If God is possible, then his existence would mean, in our best account of what the possible is, that some combination of particulars and universals is not a combination of particulars and universals. That is simply a reductio: God is not possible, for his possibility entails too much.

From another direction: if only one of the two things, an unjustified evil or God, can be possible, the former is far easier to account for with a theory of possibility than the latter. The former is an ordinary combination of particulars and properties. The latter is a combination of properties that somehow manages to be more than *possible*: it must somehow be instantiated in *all possible worlds*, thereby precluding anything incompatible with it, where "it" is nothing less than omnipotence and perfect goodness. A metaphysically possible unjustified evil is by comparison a modest thing: one state of affairs consisting of a finite description of

properties and particulars, as opposed to God, who contains qualities of infinite dimensions stretching across all possible worlds. The former possibility is *far* easier to explain.

I offered an account of possibility in the last chapter, and on mine, the problem is easy – the possibility of unjustified evil is far simpler than the possibility of God. But I also suggested at the end of that chapter that I thought that nothing was likely to hang on the details of my own account. It seems reasonable to think that on *any* account of the metaphysics of possibility that doesn't simply beg the question for the existence of God, the possibility of a finite state of affairs like an unjustified evil is going to be far easier to account for than the possibility of a necessary perfect being.

8. Why is Necessity Essential to God?

Within classical theism, to say that God exists is to say that God exists necessarily. Further, the attributes of goodness and omnipotence are not accidental features of God: they are part of his definition, and inextricable from him. But why is this so? In this section, I will be much briefer than in the last, for I think Hugh McCann answers the question fairly well and succinctly:

It is fair to demand that any accidental properties God has will have a sufficient explanation. Otherwise, his having them would be arbitrary and not in accordance with the concept of a perfect being. But the explanation of an accidental property in a thing can never arise entirely from the thing's own nature. If it did, the property would be entailed by the entity's essence, and so would be essential rather than accidental. So the accidental properties of a thing must always be explained at least in part from without. ... [W]hatever the explanation is, it will have to invoke something extrinsic to the divine nature, and it cannot do so without introducing dependence and passivity into God.¹³²

The same can be said not only about God's properties, but about God's very existence. If the explanation of God's existence arises from anywhere other than God's own nature, dependence and passivity will be introduced into the concept of God. This gets at the heart of what is important about the necessary existence of God. Necessary existence is important not just because it is a consequence of arguments *for* the existence of God, but more fundamentally because it is essential to the explanation of God's relationship to the world.

We saw this in Findlay's account of the necessity of God: without it, God would not be worthy of worship, Findlay says, but the reason *why* contingency

¹³² H. McCann. "The God Beyond Time." In Pojman, L. and Rea, M. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Wadsworth.

would mean that God was not worthy of worship has to do with the relationship between God and the world, and between God and his own existence. His explanation:

(T)he worthy object of our worship can never be a thing that merely *happens* to exist, nor one on which all other objects merely *happen* to depend. The true object of religious reverence must not be one, merely, to which no *actual* realities stand opposed: it must be one to which such opposition is totally inconceivable.¹³³

Findlay and McCann are pointing to the same facts about divine necessity. Necessary existence is essential to explaining how the world is dependent on God, while God is independent. A dependent state of affairs is one that requires some other state of affairs to explain why it exists. Contingent beings are dependent, for their existence is not self-explanatory – a contingent being must always be either explained by something outside itself, or ultimately unexplained and accidental. Only a necessary being can be truly independent.¹³⁴

God must not be dependent on anything outside himself; this is why necessity is essential to God. His relationship to the rest of existence must be that of creator to creation: the world must depend for its existence on God, or we ought not to use the word 'God'. There is room for disagreement over cases – whether there are necessities independent of God that do not depend on him, whether there is anything over which he willingly forfeits his sovereignty, like human free will. But none of this affects the central problem: God cannot have accidental properties or

¹³³ Findlay p. 180

¹³⁴ This is tied to the principle of sufficient reason. The PSR might or might not be true in itself, but if God exists, then it clearly *must* be true: there cannot be anything that exists that God cannot explain.

exist contingently, for if he did he would be a dependent being. It is only if God is necessary that God can be sovereign over existence itself. Necessity is the *sine qua non* of the idea that God could explain why things are the way they are, and not another way.

There are other ways we might approach the same ground, apart from the principle of sufficient reason. But however we do so, the indispensability of the concept of God will be simple and clear: if God is contingent, then God cannot be the explanation of his own existence. His own existence would in that case *have no* explanation. It is only if God exists necessarily that God can explain his own existence, by appeal to his own nature. This is a condition of the existence of God that ought to be approached with some gravity.

I am aware that there are theologians who dispense with the necessity of God – Richard Swinburne, most famously, represents this type, though even he does not totally dispense with it: he merely replaces *logical* necessity with what he calls ‘factual necessity’.¹³⁵ This has resulted in Swinburne’s carrying the banner for those who reject the necessity of God, but we saw all the way back in chapter two that accounting for the necessity of God as metaphysical rather than logical is an old move, and probably the correct move. It may *look* like Swinburne rejects the necessity of God if one thinks that the necessity of God is logical, or if one ties logical necessity to Plantinga’s account of necessity as existence in all possible worlds, but Swinburne does hold onto the necessity of God. He even borrows John Hick’s term

¹³⁵ R. Swinburne. *The Existence of God*. Oxford. 1979.

for the necessity of God: “factual” necessity, which in his accounting is grounded in simplicity, eternity, and independence.

I confess that I do not even know how to respond to someone who rejects the necessity of God altogether: I understand the words, but I do not know how a person could utter them if he knew what they entailed: they entail that God is ultimately incapable of serving as the explanation for existence. So I pass over this position in relative silence.

If necessity is essential to God, it still remains to say what that necessity is. I’ll keep to a minimalist answer here, though the answer is connected to the last section, regarding the nature of possibility. God’s necessary existence means that God exists in all possible worlds: depending on what possibility *is*, necessity could range over different worlds. This means that whether God is necessary hangs on what is in all of those possible worlds. If they contain states of affairs incompatible with the qualities of God, then God is not necessary after all.

One more element to make explicit: as Hugh McCann notes, it is no minor thing to say that the qualities of God are *essential* qualities, or qualities without which God would cease to be God. If God’s qualities were accidental, then God’s nature would be dependent, and God would thus not be the explanation of the world. Goodness, omnipotence, and the rest of God’s qualities are qualities God possesses in every possible world. It is therefore wrong to respond to the ontological problem of evil by thinking that what happens in other possible worlds is irrelevant, as long as God is *actually* good and omnipotent.

Leibniz, for instance, seems to see the problem and tries to avoid it this way:

[A]lthough his will is always infallible and always tends toward the best, the evil, or the lesser good, which he rejects, does not cease to be possible in itself.¹³⁶

What happens in other worlds is irrelevant to God's actual goodness, for God actually always chooses the best. But what happens in other possible worlds is relevant indeed to God's necessity. If these lesser possible worlds are metaphysically possible, then God might be *actually* good for rejecting them, but the idea that he is good across all possible worlds is inconsistent with the idea that such lesser worlds are even possible.

So, God's necessity means that God exists, and possesses all of his essential properties, in all possible worlds. After all, if he lacks an essential property in some world, he could not exist in that world. If we try to make it mean less, we lose too much: we lose the idea that God can serve as the principle of sufficient reason and therefore as the metaphysical ground of all existence. This is part of what it means to be God: God must explain the existence of the world, and ultimately no contingent being could do so. The corollary of this, however, is that if there is any evil incompatible with the perfections of God, in any metaphysically possible world, the ontological problem of evil arises. The necessity of God has costs.

¹³⁶ Leibniz, G. *Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument Reduced to Syllogistic Form*. In *The Philosophical Works of Leibniz*, ed. G.M Duncan. New Haven. 1890.

9. What *Kind* of Problem is This?

The ontological problem of evil is certainly not *just* a version of the problem of evil: it is an ontological disproof as well. It sits between them, perhaps uneasily – it might be easier to understand if it were simply one or the other, neatly filed into its proper category. As a version of the problem of evil, it is a step removed from the concerns about the actual world that normally characterize that problem. The question of what evils *could* exist is not what has traditionally driven the problem of evil.

Further, the normal resources of the problem of evil are largely irrelevant here. Theodicy is irrelevant, for instance, if theodicy is meant to be the explanation of the evil in the actual world. Unless some theodicy, or some set of them, ranged across all possible worlds, it will not help. The free will theodicy, for instance, might for all we know be true in the actual world, but if there is some other possible world that lacks this justification of evil, then the ontological problem of evil is sound. A greater good theodicy might for all we know be true in the actual world, but if there is some other possible world in which it fails, then the ontological problem of evil is sound. Theodicies, as justifications of the particular evils in the actual worlds, are too narrow a weapon to use here.

In another sense, though, the ontological problem of evil is absolutely about theodicy, in that it is about the possibility of its failure. Take some particular theodicy – Malebranche’s appeal to the order of nature and simplicity, for instance.¹³⁷ If those are truly the features that explain the world’s relationship to the

¹³⁷ N. Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*. Oxford 1992.

perfection of God, and if a world that lacks those qualities is metaphysically possible, then God is impossible. Theodicies can in that sense be taken as the starting point of the problem: the possibility of evils that evade them, the possibility of the absence of elements of them, generate the ontological problem.

Perhaps some evil is justifiable – perhaps more than we expect. There can be no courage without danger, no sympathy without pain, no fortitude without hardship. Seneca puts it eloquently:

[To be always happy and to pass through life without a mental pain is to be ignorant of one half of nature. You have entered as a contestant at the Olympic Games, but none other besides you; you gain the crown, but the victory you do not gain. ... I judge you unfortunate because you have never been unfortunate; you have passed through life without an antagonist; no one will know what you can do – not even yourself.¹³⁸

These are compelling thoughts: they make it clear enough how evil *could* be justified. But it is a very different thing to think that evil is *necessarily* justified, or that it *could not be unjustified*. If someone were to think in some other context that evil is *necessarily* justified, we might wonder whether he understood what he was saying.

Could considerations like these apply to every possible world? They must, if theodicy is going to be a response to this problem. The theodacist is now in the situation the defender of the logical problem of evil has been in for the last fifty years, since Pike's early construction of the modal defense. The defender of the logical problem, according to the modal defense, has to show that the proposition, 'A wholly good being always eliminates evil as far as it can,' is a *necessary truth*. Now,

¹³⁸ Seneca, "On Providence."

since we're including the necessity of God in the problem, the theodist has to show that the proposition, 'A wholly good being has a justification to allow evil,' is a necessary truth, one which holds across all possible degrees of suffering, across all possible kinds of injustice, across all possible evil.

None of that is forthcoming in any theodicy I have yet seen. The elements of those theodicies – free will, goods that outweigh evils, order and simplicity, and so on – are themselves *contingencies*: how could they hold across all possible worlds when they very likely don't *exist* across all possible worlds? Does some set cover some worlds, and others cover others? Could there be no deontologically unjustifiable evil that defeats all theodicy? The scope of possibility is infinite: to claim that some theodicy holds across all of it is a breathtakingly difficult claim to defend.

If God is a necessary being, essentially good and omnipotent, then all possible evil would be justified. *All possible evil would be justified*. Let us dwell for a moment on what it would mean to accept that idea. Someone might ask whether that is any worse than thinking that all actual evil is justified; I think that it is clearly much worse. The world itself could clearly be much worse than it is. The actual world is full of good things, at least sometimes: love, justice, beauty. Is a world without those things possible? They are all contingent. We feel lucky when we find love or beauty. Subtract all the good from the world. Magnify the evil in intensity, duration, injustice. Is the goodness of God consistent even with that?

If God is conceived as nothing more than omnipotent and perfectly good, these particular problems do not arise. The problem of evil is usually narrowly

focused on that triad – evil, omnipotence, perfect goodness. The believer may be rescued from this traditional problem by theodicy. The necessity of God changes the nature of the problem. Epicurus set the terms for one form of the problem. If we were to start with the book of *Job*, the relevant attribute might have been *justice*, rather than goodness. Eternity might, from another viewpoint, be the relevant question: will God *always* remain good?

The ontological problem of evil is a challenge to the notion that God can be the ultimate explanation of why things are the way they are. If God is to explain why this contingent world exists, then he himself must exist necessarily. If God is to be a moral answer to the problem of evil, then he himself must be essentially good, which means he must discern between possible worlds and preclude those inconsistent with his goodness. He both must, and cannot, exist in all possible worlds. Explaining this world both metaphysically and morally by appeal to the same being, the same God, is therefore impossible. This, I think, is the problem evil raises for necessity: it defuses God's explanatory power.

As a challenge to the idea that the world can be explained by appeal to one God, it is a version of the contingency argument – a cosmological argument against the existence of God. I also think that the ontological problem of evil is a challenge to the meaning of our moral language. John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant both focus on the meaning of our moral language in the face of the problem of evil. Kant, in his examination of *Job*, insists on Job's obligation to be honest about his sense of injustice in God, and to insist on his dignity even in the face of God's power:

“Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me.” With this disposition he proved that he did not found his morality on faith, but his faith on morality.¹³⁹

For Kant, the dignity of man ought to be upheld even in the face of God. Morality’s categorical nature extends even that far. If our rights are truly absolute, then they extend even into this domain: if Job has been treated unjustly by God, he deserves that it be made right. Justice means the same for God as it does for us.

My question about this is simple: is it possible to maintain one’s moral integrity in this way if one believes that all possible evils are justified? Is it possible to have a moral framework capable of distinguishing, say, justice from injustice if one decides beforehand that in the special case of God there can be nothing – no *possible* thing – that God does that falls into the category of the unjust? The modal domain of the problem of evil highlights Kant’s point.

John Stuart Mill’s answer to the problem of evil similarly focuses not on the particulars of theodicy, but on moral integrity. In his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*, Mill declares that:

“I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow-creatures; and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.”¹⁴⁰

Mill, like Kant, insists less on some particular answer to the problem of evil than on the importance of maintaining one’s integrity in the face of the problem. We should not abandon our moral principles in the face of God.

¹³⁹ Kant, I. “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy.” Reprinted in A. Wood and G. di Giovanni, *Religion and Rational Theology*, CUP. 2001.

¹⁴⁰ Mill, J.S. *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy*. 1865. Reprinted in M. Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil*. Blackwell. 2000.

The meaning of God's own goodness also becomes opaque if unjustified evil is impossible, and the notion that God creates the universe freely becomes a charade. *There are no wrong possibilities*. In what sense then is God good? All that God does is equivalent to everything else he could have done instead. If all possible worlds are equally consistent with God's attributes, it means that there can be no morally significant choice to make between them – all possible choices are on equal footing. What could it mean to say that God knows the reasons why things are this way rather than another, if there could *be* no such reasons, as all possible worlds are on equal moral footing? The problems multiply.

The ontological problem of evil, then, is an insistence that the line between what is acceptable from God and what is not has to be drawn *somewhere* – if nowhere in the actual world, then at least somewhere in the world of possibility. How do we make sense of the very existence of the problem of evil as a human problem, as something that has troubled so many people, if the “problem” itself is impossible? People have worried about whether God is good, given the evil in the world, for nearly as long as we have records of writing. The story of *Job*, the deep flaws in the Greek gods, the oceans of ink spilled constructing theodicies and doubts and varieties of forms of the problem itself: can we make sense of all that human thought about the problem of evil if evil incompatible with God was *impossible*? It might be metaphysically impossible anyway, and we might be epistemically thinking it possible when it's impossible, but this papers over the significance of the problem. If a mother loses her child and wants to know why, I doubt that it would help to be told that all possible worlds are equally justifiable, that anything God does to her

child is equally justifiable, and that no possible action of God's towards her child could impugn his goodness.

We call things metaphysically impossible cautiously, when there is some reason to do so. To say the evil incompatible with God is impossible, that all that ink has been spilled over a metaphysical impossibility, barring some good, non-question-begging reason to do so, is to fail to take the problem of evil seriously. The notion that some possibilities are right and others are wrong is a precondition of making moral judgments about the world at all, and if one denies the possibility of this at the outset, one is, I think, refusing to make moral judgments about the problem of evil. And that is refusing to take the problem seriously.

Antony Flew's reflections on the meaning of religious language are fitting at this point:

[I]t often seems to people who are not religious as if there was no conceivable event or series of events the occurrence of which would be admitted by sophisticated religious people to be a sufficient reason for conceding, 'There wasn't a God after all,' or 'God does not really love us, then.'

"No conceivable event," Flew says. The ontological problem of evil is a test case for his hypothesis. Flew takes this to mean that language about God is meaningless. So, a non-rhetorical question: if every possible state of affairs is consistent with God's perfect goodness, what does God's goodness mean?

10. The Contingency Argument

Let us return for a moment to the passage from Terence Penelhum with which I introduced chapter 1:

“[The problem of evil] seems to result from two distinguishable functions that the idea of God has. It is an ultimate source of explanations of why things are as they are; it is also the embodiment of the very standard by which many of them are found wanting.”¹⁴¹

We can call these the modal and the moral functions of the idea of God.

The conjunction of the two is a strange thing: the kinds of things one wants to say when one thinks about the problem of evil on the one hand and about the necessity of God on the other hand seem to be totally at odds. The problem of evil presents us with a world of hardship and fortitude, danger and courage, constraint and freedom, good and evil, sickness and health: a world of moral variety. The problem of evil tries to reconcile the evils in that world with the existence of a being of no such variety – a being that is perfectly good, omnipotent, sovereign, eternal, simple. We also live in a world of contingency and accident, and the modal function of God tries to explain that world by appeal to a necessary being who can explain that contingency away. The two functions are at odds: a God who can be the explanation of contingency must be a necessary being, while a God who can discern the good possibilities from the bad and guide this world in the right way must in some sense not be necessary, for his existence must guide us towards one world and preclude the other.

¹⁴¹ Penelhum, T. “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil.” *Religious Studies* 2 (1966): 95-107.

A useful vantage point from which to see both problems at once, the problem of evil and the necessity of God, is through the contingency argument. The contingency argument explains why necessity is essential to God, because it explains the role necessity plays in God's capacity to be the ultimate explanation of the universe, in both a metaphysical way, as when he serves as an answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, and in a moral way, as he is when he serves as an answer to the question of why evil exists, in the particular way that it does, when innumerable other worlds were possible. The contingency argument is thus a bridge between questions about divine necessity and the problem of evil.

The contingency argument gives reason to doubt Findlay's claim that necessary existence is meaningless, as it offers accounts of precisely what that necessity is supposed to mean. God's necessity means that he exists in all possible worlds. God's goodness, on the other hand, consists in the fact that he chose this world rather than some other world, not arbitrarily, but rightly and justly. If the choice was arbitrary, the metaphysical problem of contingency is not solved, and the moral qualities of God are not preserved.

Samuel Clarke offers a disjunctive syllogism: either the world is an "infinite progression" of dependent beings, or there is an independent being on which the world depends. The former hypothesis, he argues, is impossible, for that infinite progression, considered as a whole, would have no cause from without, and no necessity from within, and would therefore be unexplained.¹⁴² But there is, he says,

¹⁴² Clarke, Samuel. *A Discourse Concerning Natural Religion*. 1705.

a “contradiction” in the notion that the universe as a whole might be unexplained, though every member of it is explained. An endless series of dependent beings is therefore impossible. So there must be an independent being, which everyone calls God.

We live in a contingent universe, but the contingent universe demands explanation in terms of something that is not contingent. There must therefore be a necessary, independent being. But what contradiction could there be in the notion that the universe is unexplained? On the surface, Clarke seems just to be committing the fallacy of composition:

“ ’Tis an express contradiction and impossibility; ’tis a supposing something to be caused, because it’s granted in every one of its stages of succession, not to be necessary and from itself; and yet that on the whole it is caused absolutely by nothing.”¹⁴³

But why must a whole be like its parts?

The premise that is driving this argument is the principle of sufficient reason: if everything that exists must have an explanation of its existence, then the universe as a whole must have an explanation of its existence.¹⁴⁴ And then the contingency argument comes together: if the universe contains nothing but contingent, dependent beings, that is, beings which might not exist, and which require something outside themselves to explain their existence, then it would have no explanation from within or from without. It would have no explanation “from within,” because every part of the universe would be dependent and incapable of

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Rowe, W. *The Cosmological Argument*. Princeton University Press. 1975. William Rowe clarifies the role that the PSR plays in Clarke’s contingency argument.

explaining the whole; it would have no explanation “from without,” because by hypothesis there would *be* nothing outside of it, if all that exists is just an infinite series of dependent beings. When we put that consequence, that such a universe would have no explanation, together with the principle of sufficient reason, we discover that the universe as a whole could have no explanation except on the hypothesis that there is an independent, necessary being. It must have an explanation; therefore, God must exist.

Unless God is a necessary being, he cannot be the explanation of the universe in the ways demanded by the contingency argument. Leave aside for the moment whether the contingency argument is sound, or whether the PSR is true; the PSR offers a fundamental reason to think that necessity is part of the idea of God. When we call Findlay’s argument an ontological disproof, we point to one reason why God has traditionally been thought to be a necessary being: necessity might be part of the very concept of God, in an *a priori* way. But this cosmological approach to God’s necessity arguably cuts deeper: without necessity, God cannot be the explanation of why the world is the way that it is. Put another way: it may be an open question whether the principle of sufficient reason is true, but *if* God exists, then it is not an open question. The PSR must in that case be true. If God exists, then there must be an explanation of every fact, both metaphysical and moral. So, whether or not the contingency argument is sound, it helps us to understand what it means to say that God explains the existence of the universe. To surrender God’s necessity is to surrender his explanatory power.

With that in mind, the ontological disproof might be better thought of as a cosmological disproof, an inversion of this contingency argument. If God exists, then he exists necessarily. But God's necessity is impossible, because the possibility of unjustified evil presents it. So God is impossible, this time as the result of a *cosmological* disproof.

Viewed through the lens of the contingency argument, we could interpret this argument as saying that explanation of the universe by appeal to a metaphysically necessary perfect being is impossible, because such a being would have to (a) exist in every possible world, including the unjustifiably bad ones, and (b) could not exist in those worlds, because they are inconsistent with his perfection. Therefore, there could be no being that explains the world both metaphysically and morally at once.

William Rowe's work on divine freedom is useful by comparison.¹⁴⁵ Rowe argues that if God is a necessary being who is necessarily good, omnipotent and omniscient, then he is not free, as he must choose the best of all possible worlds. One could offer a compatibilist account of freedom, like the one Leibniz gives when faced with the same question, in response to this.¹⁴⁶ Or one could argue, as Robert Adams does,¹⁴⁷ that some element of God's goodness, like his grace, might mean that he could justifiably choose some lesser state of affairs (though presumably not just *any* state of affairs). One could say, as Alvin Plantinga does, that God might create

¹⁴⁵ Rowe, William. "Can God Be Free?" *Faith and Philosophy* (19): 405-424.

¹⁴⁶ Leibniz, G.W. *Theodicy*. 1710. (See his response to Objection VIII in the abridgement.)

¹⁴⁷ Adams, Robert. "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* (81): 317-32. 1972.

free creatures, in a libertarian sense, who in turn freely make the world less good than it otherwise could have been.¹⁴⁸ Rowe's argument does not prove that God is not free, unless he can cut off these lines of escape. Much less is it a proof that God is impossible. But it is a glimpse of the problems that arise when the problem of evil comes together with the cosmological argument: just how is it that God can be a necessary being, given the moral variety among possible worlds?

Perhaps God does not have to create the best of all possible worlds to be perfectly good. But while we have many and various accounts of what God's goodness or justice includes and excludes, it seems as though it must exclude *something* if it is not to be an empty concept. Adams appeals to the notion of grace, and Plantinga to the notion of human freedom, to explain why our world might be less than the best, but surely the grace of God and libertarian freedom are contingencies, freely given by God, not necessities that cut across all possible worlds. Perhaps Leibniz is right after all, contra these responses, that God must create the best possible world.¹⁴⁹ But whatever God's goodness means, there must be *some* distinction between the worlds a perfectly good God would create and the ones he would not, or the goodness of God is empty. And the worlds in which that meaning is lacking render God impossible.

Findlay suggested theism wants to have it both ways: to have propositions about God be necessary, in the sense that they are true no matter what the empirical circumstances turn out to be, and also somehow to have those propositions be

¹⁴⁸ Plantinga, Alvin. "Which Worlds Could God Have Created?" *Journal of Philosophy* (70): 539-552. 1973.

¹⁴⁹ Grover, Stephen. "Why Only the Best is Good Enough." *Analysis* (48): 224. 1988.

relevant to the empirical circumstances. If God's goodness is relevant to the empirical world, then it cannot also be true that God's goodness is independent of the empirical world, and true across all possible worlds. The contingency argument shows this conflict in practice.

The contingency argument tries to demonstrate that God provides explanations that are essential, and cannot be had without him – not just causal explanations, but modal explanations. But one of the contingent things that demands explanation is evil. When religious believers talk about what they would ask of God if they met him, the problem of evil holds an important place: it, like the existence of the universe, is something that demands explanation. The questions of the cosmological argument and the questions of the problem of evil come together naturally here. When people want to ask God about the deaths of their children, or about their depression, they are asking questions that sit at the intersection of God's necessity and the problem of evil, questions that are at once modal and moral, about whether things could have been different, and why they are this way.

The contingency argument is primarily about the first, but the two kinds of questions are similar enough to be addressed together, and are at any rate both essential to God. I think the ordinary religious believer would be equally dismayed to find that God has no ultimate answer to why the universe exists, and that God has no answer to the problem of evil. The ontological disproof, though, shows that the two answers rule each other out.

The account of how God's necessity and goodness relate to one another usually takes something like the following form: God exists necessarily, and has

before him all of the possible worlds which he might create. Some one or more of them is in accord with his perfect goodness. He creates this world, which is one of those possible worlds. God could have made some other world, perhaps one in which some suffering woman did not lose her child, but chose to make this world instead, because – and here the stories start to diverge: because this is the best of all possible worlds, perhaps, or because this world contains some good that would have been impossible without the loss of her child, or because freedom is impossible without evil.

Now: if this story is to make sense, then it must be possible that there was a *wrong* choice, though perhaps God did not make that wrong choice. If no choices were even possibly wrong, then the story of God choosing this world is meaningless. But if it is possible that there be a wrong choice, then God does not exist. Wrong choices must have been possible if God is to explain – here, *morally* explain – the contingent world. But those same wrong choices mean that God is *not* a necessary being, for any of them would be a world *without* God, as the making wrong choices is inconsistent with the nature of God. There is an irreconcilable conflict between God's necessary existence, in which he must exist even in the unjustifiable worlds, and God's necessary goodness, which precludes those worlds.

And so we have a cosmological disproof, the same argument that served as an ontological disproof and as a logical problem of evil, now serving instead as a

contingency argument *against* the existence of God.¹⁵⁰ One way to express it is with a *reductio*:

a) If there is a God, then God must exist in worlds with unjustified evil, as he must be the ultimate metaphysical explanation of why this world exists rather than any other.

b) If there is a God, then God must *not* exist in worlds with unjustified evil, as he must be perfect in all possible worlds.

Therefore, God does not exist.

The two different explanatory roles God plays mean that God both must and must not exist in all possible worlds. This is impossible; so God is impossible.

This is a cosmological argument against the existence of God, but it is also just another way of expressing the ontological problem of evil. I believe that it is where Findlay's ontological disproof and the problem of evil naturally and independently lead, and why they are so easily fused together into one problem: that one problem is the contingency argument. A brief look at some particular theistic contingency arguments shows how this problem arises for each.

Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder offer the following model of world-creation. We are to imagine an omnipotent "Jove", who wants to create a good world, but sees that for each world he might create there is a better one. He therefore does the following:

¹⁵⁰ Quentin Smith has argued for a cosmological disproof from the supposed impossibility of a first cause; this is quite different from that argument. See Q. Smith, "Causation and the Logical Impossibility of a Divine Cause." *Philosophical Topics* 21. 1996.

“Although he can create any of them, he can't create the best of them because there is no best. Faced with this predicament, Jove first sorts the worlds according to certain criteria. For example, he puts on his left worlds in which some inhabitants live lives that aren't worth living, and on his right worlds in which every inhabitant's life is worth living; he puts on his left worlds in which some horrors fail to serve an outweighing good, and on his right worlds in which no horror fails to serve an outweighing good. (We encourage the reader to use her own criteria.)”¹⁵¹

According to the Howard-Snyders' story, Jove chooses from among the worlds on his right randomly. The idea that a God might behave randomly is bizarre, but Jove does not behave *totally* randomly. There are worlds that are not to be created by Jove, because they are not good, and Jove would not be good were he to create them. There are many good worlds that God could create, but no *best* one, so God creates randomly, but the choice between good and evil is not random.

This is a helpful starting point for recognizing the problem, because it specifies no particular moral criteria other than 'goodness', and shows that our problem does not depend on any particular moral criteria. The problem lies in the very notion that God chooses among possible worlds on *any moral criteria at all*. Jove, the Howard-Snyders imagine, puts worlds with lives that are not worth living and worlds with horrors that fail to serve a greater good on his left: he will not create those worlds, because Jove is *good*, and that goodness means that there are states of affairs that he would not create. This gives Jove's goodness its meaning. If he had no criteria on which he chose, to say that God is good would be empty. As there is no best of all possible worlds, the Howard-Snyders tell us that if God chooses randomly from the ones that do meet his moral criteria, he will have done

¹⁵¹ Howard-Snyder, D. and F. "How an Unsurpassable Being Can Create a Surpassable World." *Faith and Philosophy*. 1994.

“nothing to impugn his status as essentially morally unsurpassable *in any respect whatsoever*.”¹⁵² But if Jove had created one of the worlds on his left instead, i.e. one of the worlds with lives not worth living or with evils that served no purpose, then he certainly would have done something to “impugn” his moral status. God’s possession of any moral criterion at all – the Howard-Snyders’, Leibniz’s, Plantinga’s, your own – through which he would reject possible worlds entails that there are possible worlds inconsistent with those moral qualities.

Perhaps, as Leibniz thought, only the best possible world was consistent with the perfection of God. Lawrence Resnick, in a paper from 1973, offers the following argument:¹⁵³

- 1) If God exists, then this is the best of all possible worlds.
- 2) If this is the best of all possible worlds, then worlds worse than this are logically possible.
- 3) If ‘God exists’ is necessarily true, then ‘this world is not the best of all possible worlds’ is necessarily false.
- 4) If there are no other possible worlds that are not the best, then this world is not the best, as there are no others to which it may be compared.
- 5) If God exists necessarily, then this both is and is not the best of all possible worlds.

Therefore, God is not possible.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Resnick, L. “God and the Best Possible World.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 10, No. 4: 313-317.

Resnick's target here is the notion of the "best of all possible worlds": if God exists necessarily, then this is the only possible world, but it cannot be the only possible world if 'best' is a term of comparison. Superlatives are not possible without comparables.

Resnick, like William Rowe, needs the premise that God must choose the best possible world for his argument to get off the ground. A great many theists have, with some plausibility, denied this: Alvin Plantinga, Robert Adams, and the Howard-Snyders above deny it. Thomas Aquinas denied it. Perhaps, they say, there are logically possible worlds in which God is justified in allowing depraved humans to freely actualize evil.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps the best-possible-world claim depends upon the notion that God is a utilitarian, when he is not a utilitarian.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps the various possible goods are incommensurable.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps there could always be more good things.¹⁵⁷ Resnick argues that if God exists, then this both is and is not the best possible world, but this argument will not stand if God's existence does *not* entail that this is the best of all possible worlds.

But a cosmological disproof need not depend on any *particular* criterion of divine goodness; it depends only on the fact that there must be *some such criterion*. The contradiction Resnick points to arises from the fact that if something is to be the *best*, there must be lesser things to which it can be compared, and those lesser things are impossible if God exists necessarily: the *particular* lesser worlds will

¹⁵⁴ A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*. Eerdman's Publishing. 1977.

¹⁵⁵ R. Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review* (81): 317-32. 1972.

¹⁵⁶ S. Grover, "Incommensurability and the Best of All Possible Worlds." *The Monist*, Vol. 18, No. 4. (1998)

¹⁵⁷ A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*. Eerdman's Publishing. 1977.

change if the criterion of God's goodness does not limit him to the best of all possible worlds, but there will nevertheless be *some* such worlds inconsistent with the goodness of God. The problem is that, unless we are to collapse into Spinozist necessitarianism,¹⁵⁸ all these other worlds, worlds which must be impossible if God exists necessarily, are simply *not* impossible.

Leibniz appears to have seen this problem. In the supplement to the *Theodicy*, the eighth and final objection Leibniz addresses was this:

Whoever cannot fail to choose the best is not free.

God cannot fail to choose the best.

Hence God is not free.¹⁵⁹

Leibniz denies the major of the syllogism, and argues in response that true freedom consists in always choosing the good by being led towards the good by one's own inclination, and acting on the good by one's own power. But then we have this passage:

Nevertheless, although his will is always infallible and always tends toward the best, the evil, or the lesser good, which he rejects, does not cease to be possible in itself; otherwise, the necessity of the good would be geometrical (so to speak), or metaphysical and altogether absolute; the contingency of things would be destroyed, and there would be no choice. But this sort of necessity, which does not destroy the possibility of the contrary, has this name only by analogy; it becomes effective, not by the pure essence of things, but by that which is outside of them, above them – namely, by the will of God.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ See O. Koistinen, "Spinoza's Proof of Necessitarianism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 67, Sept 2003, pp. 283-310.

¹⁵⁹ G.W. Leibniz, "Supplement to the *Theodicy*." In Rowe, ed. *The Problem of Evil*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Evil simply cannot be impossible, Leibniz says, if there is to be choice, for choice depends on contingency. Since Leibniz is committed to the thesis that there is choice, he must therefore be committed to contingency as well. The impossibility of 'the evil' or 'the lesser good' that God rejects is not an internal impossibility: these things only become impossible through something *external* to them: i.e., through the will of God.

But the response to Leibniz is obvious: God's goodness is not contingent. If God's goodness were contingent, then the explanation of it would not be found in God's nature, and God would not be the explanation of the world. Asserting that lesser worlds are *possible enough* because their impossibility is determined by something external is an illusory solution, because that external being *is a necessary being*. Something incompatible with a necessary being is as impossible as anything can be.

To put the matter another way: Leibniz is absolutely right that the reasons for the supposed impossibility of unjustified worlds lie not in those worlds, but in the essential properties of God. But that is precisely the problem: the existence of God would mean that states of affairs are not possible, when we know that, internally, they are possible. Leibniz says that the impossibility of unjustifiable worlds is not "metaphysical," but depends on God;¹⁶¹ but if God's existence is metaphysically necessary, then anything that is incompatible with God's attributes is metaphysically impossible. And worlds with unjustified evil are simply *not*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

metaphysically impossible: Leibniz himself cannot help but to dwell on them, and to argue that the actual world is not among them.

The cosmological disproof, then, is this: if God exists, then he must exist in all possible worlds, for he must be capable of metaphysical explanation – he must be capable of explaining why there is something rather than nothing, and why that something is this rather than some alternative. But if God exists, there must also be worlds in which he would not exist, for God is essentially good: God must be the reason why unjustifiable possibilities do not obtain. God's essential goodness prevents them. But these two demands are contradictory: God's necessary existence is incompatible with God's essential goodness. The former requires that he exist in worlds precluded by the latter. This is how the ontological disproof and the contingency argument come together.

Nothing in this argument, again, depends on Leibniz's particular criterion for God's choice; the problem arises because God is choosing on any moral criterion at all. If God is supposed to be a necessary being, a being that exists in all possible worlds, then God cannot sort out possible worlds that are morally unjustifiable, as God would in that case be sorting out possible worlds that could not contain God, and there simply could be no such possible worlds if God exists necessarily. The very idea of God choosing, or sorting, or determining *in any way* which worlds are consistent and inconsistent with his goodness means that there are possible worlds incompatible with God's essential attributes. And if there are such worlds, God is not necessary, and God does not exist.

So, we have a dilemma. Either:

(a) God exists in all possible worlds, including the bad ones. In this case, he is capable of metaphysically explaining the problem of contingency, but not morally explaining the problem of evil, because he would in that case not be essentially good.

Or:

(b) God does not exist in all possible worlds, because his moral perfection is incompatible with an important set of them, the bad ones. In this case God is capable of morally explaining the problem of evil, but not metaphysically explaining the problem of contingency, because he would not exist in all possible worlds.

The world cannot be explained in two fundamental philosophical respects, metaphysically and morally, by appeal to one necessary being. A necessary being could exist, or an essentially good being could exist, but not both.

10. Conclusions

I set out in this work to show that two arguments for the impossibility of God become stronger when they are synthesized into one, and that the resulting argument is a sound proof of the impossibility of God. The ontological disproof argues that God is impossible because necessary existence is impossible; the logical problem of evil argues that it is impossible to reconcile evil with the goodness and omnipotence of God. Each of those arguments has been adjudicated, and individually each likely fails. But together, they work differently: it is impossible to reconcile the problem of evil, particularly the range and depth of *possible* evil, with the necessity of God. The necessity of God therefore changes the structure of the problem of evil, and the problem of evil changes the structure of the ontological disproof. The ontological disproof and the logical problem of evil complete each other.

If God existed, he would exist in all possible worlds, but evil incompatible with God is possible: some possibilities preclude the perfections of God. So God is metaphysically impossible. I do not mean that God is *epistemically* impossible; perhaps there is something in this argument we don't know, compelling and plausible though it might be. Every argument depends on the truth of its premises; I have argued at length for each premise of this argument, and if any premise is true, it is necessarily true, just from the nature of the case. What is metaphysically possible is necessarily possible. If those premises *are* true, then God is impossible. Do we know that evil incompatible with God is possible, with absolute certainty? Perhaps not. I don't mean this concession to give back too much ground. I think that

it would be *shocking* to find out that every possible evil is compatible with God's perfections – shocking morally, as much as epistemically.

What should the orthodox philosophical theist say in response? There is really only one live option: deny the possibility of evil incompatible with God. I have argued for that possibility at length in this dissertation: it fits within all of the most independently plausible accounts of possibility. I have explained exactly what I think possibility is and why. The denial of the possibility of unjustified evil should do the same work: fit its impossibility within an independently plausible account of possibility. 'Independently' here means in part independent of assumptions of the existence of God. Simply denying it on the grounds that the theist *knows* that God exists, and that such evil must therefore be impossible, is question-begging. If the very question is about the existence of God, one cannot very well start with the existence of God. God is at any rate impossible: the preceding work showed why. Still, this is the premise the theist ought to defuse. Perhaps there is something intrinsically impossible about such evil, leaving aside its consequences for God, though I do not at all see what it could possibly be. Nothing about evil incompatible with perfection bears any of the ordinary marks of metaphysical impossibility.

The move from the belief that all *actual* evil is justified to the belief that all *possible* evil is justified raises serious theological questions for the theist anyway; it is not a cost-free move. The scope of God's omnipotence is altered. The *meaning* of omnipotence might be unaltered; omnipotence is the power to do all that is possible. But the range of what is possible will turn out to be much smaller than most of us thought, and with it the range of God's power to create from amongst all

possibilities diminishes. God's omniscience is diminished as well. If there are fewer possible worlds than we imagine, then is there not less for God to know? How does the cosmological argument work, if there are fewer worlds from which God can choose to create, and none of them are inconsistent with his goodness? Does that not reduce God's freedom to triviality? I explored these problems above in the chapter on the cosmological argument; I raise them again here as a challenge to the theist who takes this approach.

But of all the attributes that change if every possible evil is compatible with the existence of God, God's goodness surely changes most fundamentally. The notion that evil incompatible with God is impossible could be taken in more than one way. It could mean that the range of evils is as broad as it is in our imaginations, or broader, and that in the zeal to remain committed to God the theist is willing to accept all of it, the worst of our imaginations, as justified: all that we imagine *is* possible, and is justified. That would, I think, be morally bankrupt. It might instead mean that the list of possible evils is narrower than we thought, narrower than our imaginations, so that states of affairs that we think are possible are not possible, while if they were, they would not be compatible with the goodness of God. I would hope that the theist means it in this second way. That option, I think, involves more moral integrity, but is metaphysically mistaken: evil incompatible with God *is* possible, and when the theist wonders about the problem of evil, she is considering exactly that possibility. The more parsimonious answer would be to simply reject the proposition that every possible evil is compatible with God.

This argument has been couched largely in possible-worlds language: perhaps the theist will object to that language and try to account for the problem in other terms – Thomistic terms, perhaps, or one might plead ignorance about modal epistemology altogether and turn to skeptical theism. One might lean on some argument *for* the existence of God and pull a G.E. Moore shift,¹⁶² arguing that we know the existence of God already, so that evil incompatible with God *must* be impossible. But then, God is impossible, as has been shown in this work, so that shift won't work – or at least it will work both ways. As I suggest above, a legitimate response to this argument ought not to beg the question for the existence of God, when the existence of God is the very question at stake.

In whatever sense God is necessary, in that same sense evil incompatible with God must be impossible. If God's necessity is logical, then evil incompatible with God must be logically impossible, for instance. Surely such evil is not *logically* impossible. Whatever necessity God does have must meet two conditions: evil incompatible with God must be impossible in the same sense in which God is necessary, and that sense of necessity must be robust enough to play the functional role that necessity ought to play in a concept of God, namely to explain why things are as they are, and not another way. I do not believe that any account of the metaphysics of the problem can meet both conditions at once. If the account of necessity is narrow enough to preclude evil incompatible with God, then it will be too narrow to explain why things are as they are and not another way – it will fail to

¹⁶² William Rowe's term, from "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* (16). 1979.

include precisely the 'other ways' we wonder about when we think about the problem of evil. If, on the other hand, the account of necessity is robust enough to explain why things are as they are and not another way, then it will be broad enough to include evil incompatible with God. That is my suspicion.

But that is the object for the orthodox theist: reject the possibility of evil incompatible with God, while maintaining an account of the necessity of God that explains why things are as they are and not another way. In the meantime, what should the rest of us do?

We should, for one thing, reject the claim that the logical problem of evil is dead. There is a powerful form of the logical problem of evil that is very much alive, and it rests on relatively modest grounds. The power of the argument is generated not by any extraordinary claim about evil, as it rests on a mere possibility, but by the metaphysical overreach of the claim that God exists necessarily. The notion that evil cannot be a disproof of the existence of God is entrenched: the triumph of the modal defense, the shift in the literature to the evidential problem of all, all points to a surrender of terrain in the problem of evil. In the terms in which Mackie laid out the logical problem of evil, that is all probably the correct response. But there are logical problems of evil remaining to be explored. This one, the ontological problem of evil, is, I think, sound; for that matter, there might be others.

We should also reject the line of thought among what we might call *scientific* atheists that the existence of God simply cannot be disproven. The prospects for a philosophical proof of the impossibility of God have seemed tenuous since the attempts of Findlay and Mackie more than half a century ago, and some have

concluded that there simply can be no such proof – God might be proven improbable, but not impossible, according to this line of thought. But there is an entire *range* of arguments for the impossibility of God from this one point, i.e., from the intersection of evil and divine necessity. The ontological problem of evil amounts to an ontological disproof of the existence of God, a stronger version of the problem of evil, and a contingency argument against a necessary being all at once.

What remains is to explore those arguments in greater depth individually. If the goal for the theist is to provide an account of modality that maintains the necessity of God while excluding the possibility of evil incompatible with God, the goal moving forward for this argument is to develop the problem of evil, the ontological disproof, and the cosmological disproof in greater depth individually, in the terms laid out in the ontological problem of evil. Where the theist defends the necessity of God in cosmological terms, the atheist can defuse it with a cosmological disproof. Where the theist rejects evil incompatible with God, the atheist can defend its place within the problem of evil. Where the theist offers an ontological argument to show that God must exist, the atheist can offer an ontological disproof in return to demonstrate the impossibility of such a God. Each of these arguments is far more powerful when it borrows liberally from the others than it could be alone: that is ultimately what I want the ontological problem of evil to show. There is room here for the development of a *systematic* atheology. These various lines of thought about the problem of evil, the ontological disproof, and the cosmological disproof all point from different directions to one deep problem in the concept of God: evil makes God impossible after all.

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Rowe, William. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* (16). 1979. William Rowe argues that there is an evidential version of the problem of evil, distinct from the logical problem, and argues that evil offers rational grounds for accepting atheism.

Rowe, William. *The Cosmological Argument*. 1979. Rowe offers analyses and critiques of the various forms of the cosmological argument, focusing on the role of the principle of sufficient reason in the argument.

Rowe, William. "Can God Be Free?" *Faith and Philosophy* (19): 405-424. 2002. Rowe gives an argument that God is bound to create the best possible world, in a way that limits his freedom.

Schellenberg, J.L. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Cornell University Press. 1993. Schellenberg considers the hiddenness of God as a problem distinct from, but closely related to, the problem of evil.

Smith, Q. "Causation and the Logical Impossibility of a Divine Cause." *Philosophical Topics* 21. 1996.

Stalnaker, Robert. *Context and Content*. OUP. 1999. Stalnaker plays a role in the modal semantic turn that rendered doubtful Findlay's claim that the existence of God is meaningless.

Swinburne, Richard. *The Existence of God*. Clarendon. 2004. Swinburne is often cited as an example of a theologian who does not think that God's existence is necessary, but the necessity he rejects is *logical* necessity. He, like many others, thinks that God *does* possess necessity of another kind – he calls it *factual* necessity. His answer is thus well within the mainstream.

Van Inwagen, Peter. *The Problem of Evil*. OUP. 2006. Van Inwagen offers a defense against the problem of evil characterized by a distinct form of modal skepticism.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Routledge. 2001. Wittgenstein offers an account in which language about God is *meaningless*, which influenced Findlay indirectly. Wittgenstein clearly did not mean, however, that God was impossible.