

Theodicy and Blissful Freedom

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A blunt commentator on the things around us can argue that by failing to choose the 'obviously better' possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right, God cannot be both omnipotent and wholly good¹. An underlying argument runs:

- 1 (1) If God does not choose the obviously better possibility of making beings who would accept freely and always go right, God cannot be both omnipotent and wholly good. (Assumption.)
- 2 (2) God does not choose the obviously better possibility ... (Assumption.)
- 1,2 (3) God cannot be both omnipotent and wholly good. (1,2 *modus ponens*.)

This, the Underlying Argument, is weaker than the Blunt Commentator's original one. If it fails, the original one cannot succeed, but if it goes through, the original one does not necessarily go through. I number the main steps, chiefly to keep track of the assumptions.

In Part I, I argue that the Underlying Argument fails to prove the conclusion that God cannot be both omnipotent and wholly good; and that it fails, from ignoring a view exploiting the notion of blissful freedom: a theologians' notion, but one already appealed to by at least one philosopher strongly sympathetic to the Blunt Commentator's argument². In Part II, I draw attention to an ambiguity in 'always go right', with a view to pursuing, in Part III, consequences of a further ambiguity to be seen in 'God cannot be both omnipotent and good', demanding attention to two diverse forms of theism. One of these—'existence-theism'—is invulnerable to a Blunt Commentator's argument, but can exploit some of the Underlying Argument's steps to support a Blunt Commentator's conclusion in the sense needed to impugn the other form, 'character-theism'. If either the assumptions of the Blunt Commentator or those of the existence-theist turn out to be right, character-theism—the only form of theism considered in most contemporary academic discussions in English—may have to be rejected.

It is possible, of course, to accept Assumption 1, while going on to argue rather differently, as by assuming

- (4) God can be both omnipotent and wholly good
(Assumption).

and using the *modus tollens* (omitting steps of double negation), to obtain

- 1,4 (5) God does choose the obviously better possibility ...
(1,4 *modus tollens*.)

One way to take that argument, would be as a mild confirmation of the Underlying Argument, as it leads to what many would take to be the palpable falsehood of (5). But of the contradictory alternatives, (2) and (5), is (5) false at all? Is (2), however speciously plausible, justified?

The society in which most of us live is fairly obviously not one peopled by 'beings who ... act freely and always go right', and we may certainly be disposed to think things would be better if it were. It may then be supposed true that in at least one state of human existence, our actual state and situation, God does not choose the obviously better possibility... . But is that enough to justify asserting without restriction that God does not choose the obviously better possibility...

Two considerations suggest not. One is that it might seem to be supported by an unsafe rule: to the effect, say, that if in at least one case *p*, then we are entitled to assert without restriction that *p*. To see that the rule would be unsafe, consider the substitution: 'If in at least one case Hutton was a batsman who did not make a good score, then we are entitled to say without restriction that Hutton was a batsman who did not make a good score'. When asked either 'Who was Hutton, Daddy?', or 'What kind of batsman was Hutton?', we would be wildly wrong to reply 'He was a batsman who did not make a good score'.

Whether to take account of the full range of activities in question (the batting career, in Hutton's case), or to justify assertions made without restriction, by at least taking into account the paradigmatically typical case, we would seem to need rather a rule along the lines: 'If in the paradigmatically typical case, *p*, then we are entitled to assert without restriction that *p*'. In which case we reach a crux of some interest, on the paradigm of what it is to be human: and the possibility that the Underlying Argument (and the Blunt Commentator's with it) is dependent on a questionable and perhaps unjustifiable view on the paradigm of what it is to be human. What follows, in particular, if we should have to understand humans precisely as 'beings who ... [at their most typical] act freely but always go right'?

For this is what we must at least entertain, if we take the notion of

blissful freedom with the weight its proponents give to it. These proponents include mainline, traditional Christians, whose relevant doctrines imply that the blessed in heaven do not cease to be human (and hence may 'act freely' no less than in the state currently more familiar to us), yet are no longer capable in practice of going wrong.

It would seem to follow that such mainline Christians will have no reason to object to (5), and could accept also the steps which were shown above to lead to it: provided that these steps themselves can be understood in a way not objectionable to the same Christians. They may thus accept Assumption 1 of the Underlying Argument, rejecting Assumption 2, to take instead Assumption 4 and the application of the *modus tollens* which results in (5):

- 1,4 (5) God does choose the obviously better possibility.
(1,4 *modus tollens*.)

Even under the 'at least one' rule—rejected above as being unsafe—(5) would seem to be at least as well justified (supposing the background doctrines to be true) as the Blunt Commentator's favoured Assumption 2, even supposing his interpretations of the behaviour of those around us to be correct.

But defenders of blissful freedom can argue with some plausibility that, as the blessed are less liable than we currently are, to imperfections and difficulties in executing their free acts, then their state, not our current one, is the one which should be taken as paradigmatically typical of what it is to be human. And they may be able to point to some Aristotelian reinforcement, arguing that the *energeia* of a human being is only fully had in the kind of life to be had by the blessed; provided always that there are any blessed in possession of such a life.

In any case under the 'paradigmatically typical' rule, preferred above, Assumption 4, which leads to step (5) should be preferred to Assumption 2 (so long as blissful freedom is instantiated, and its defenders can assign a possibly true sense to (4)). And without Assumption 2 the Underlying Argument, and with it the Blunt Commentator's, fails to go through.

Why not, however, simply produce beings in a condition of blissful freedom, and without imperfect preliminaries? This is urged by Prof. Flew, in an article not unsympathetic to a Blunt Commentator's way of seeing things, in which he expressly notes blissful freedom as a notion current among Christians. We could then have, as a 'putative end-product people who ... always would choose the right' (QX 2). Why not, indeed? Abstractly speaking, at any rate, it would seem an idea free of intrinsic contradiction. Even concretely: in the view of its Christian defenders, it is

in fact instantiated. They are, as I understand it, committed to the view that Christ always had, in his human nature, human freedom, yet always went right. And the Catholics, committed to a doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, would surely have to maintain that the Virgin Mary always acted freely, and always went right, even outside a condition of blissful freedom. The actual creation thus provides—if the relevant doctrines can be substantiated—at least two ways in which there are beings which act freely but always go right, as Prof. Mackie asked, in his version of the Blunt Commentator's argument: even ways in which beings act freely and always go right, without having first done anything less, as Prof. Flew asked.

For asking for possible beings presumably concerns in the first instance *kinds of being*. If so, the kind of being asked for by Mackie, Flew, and Blunt Commentators generally, has already been provided. A possibility in which there are beings which act freely but always go right, is thus not a better possibility—a better kind of thing—than the one in which we live. It *is* the one in which we live. And even if what is really being asked for is a possibility in which there are *only* beings which act freely but always go right, that could be obtained too without having any different kind of thing from the present creation: but simply by having the present kind of creation, but with a narrower population (excluding Flew, Mackie, myself and any others who either fail to act freely or sometimes do not go right). Alternatively, we might all have been immaculately conceived, or were maintained in “original justice” (another theological notion which could have been brought into play here.) This might be a more admirable or less evidently imperfect individual, but it is not a better kind of individual: only a perhaps better individual of the same kind. That holds, even leaving aside my interested preference for existing, rather than not. So Assumption (2) is still not to be had, and the Blunt Commentator's argument is still not going through.

II

That is so, if ‘always go right’ need not imply any more than ‘always go so as to be judged by us as going right’, by our favoured principles and criteria, and regardless of the blessed agents' reasons for doing as they do. If this is indeed how the blessed ‘always go’, if they act at all—and that is how I understand the defenders of blissful freedom to think of the blessed—then there is no need to imagine that they then act strictly morally at all. They could be acting as they do, merely because it is blindingly obvious to them that that is what to go for in the circumstances. By ‘going right’ in that manner they may be seen to make a practical judgment, and they may be doing what we might judge as the morally

right thing to do for the occasion. But not everyone is prepared to allow this as enough for 'going right' to be strictly appropriate.

For 'always go right' can have a stronger sense, the kind of sense intended in some Kantian or intuitionist discussions: where we are understood to 'go right' not merely by acting so as to be judged by others to be going right, but only where (in addition) we act *in virtue of* some appropriate and narrowly "moral" principle, in order to achieve what we achieve. If this stronger sense of 'go right' is intended by a Blunt Commentator, and if this (broadly Kantian, morally high-toned) way of acting should be supposed to be that of the blessed, then for such a Blunt Commentator's argument too, blissful freedom would precisely answer the possibility called for. And this Blunt Commentator's argument too would fail to go through.

In fact I do not think it proper even to ascribe such narrowly "moral" behaviour to the blessed. If I understand the theological doctrines in question, the activities of the blessed lack the element of risk, of possible loss, built into the circumstances for which such narrowly "moral" activity is more usually thought appropriate. For that matter I do not imagine that either Mackie or Flew would be sympathetic to insistence on a narrow (broadly Kantian) understanding of 'go right'. I considered the possibility, in case any Blunt Commentators might wish to insist on it; and to make the point that it would not particularly help their argument.

III

One important ingredient of the original argument has not yet been challenged, or allowed its weight. How is 'God' to be taken throughout, and how are the formulas 'God can/cannot be both omnipotent and wholly good' to be understood? I have not yet come clean on this, and the consequences can be important.

We may take 'God' in either of two profoundly diverse ways. In the first, to designate something of a determinate kind—say, the instantiation of a set of severally coherent and jointly compatible properties. That God exists, with 'God' taken in this way, is the core of the doctrine which for convenience I call character-theism: it implies that God has a determinate character of some kind, whether we can know any of it or not. Overwhelmingly, today's academic theists appear to be character-theists of some kind. They sometimes identify theism tout court with nothing other than some or other form of character-theism—almost as the Duke of Wellington took religion to be nothing other than the Church of England, as by law established. Even critics who judge their case adversely, regularly seem to take it that, at any

rate, no other approach than that of the character-theist is even on offer for academically serious inquiry:

anyone who is interested in the question of the existence of God has to study first of all the divine attributes; for to say that God exists is to say that there is something that has the divine attributes; and if 'God exists' is to be true, then the divine attributes must at least themselves be coherent and jointly compatible. (A. Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford 1979, 5.)

In this approach, we may refer determinately to something, when we purport to refer to God, only if we are then referring to something of a determinate kind. As to which something, and which kind, that is to be fixed by stipulation or by being argued over. It is with an approach of this kind in mind, that theodicy most narrowly understood, and the Free Will Defence in particular, has been addressed; and that Blunt Commentators' arguments have generally been addressed to the Free Will Defence.

But there is another way of raising questions concerning God, as Hume recognised³, if we can suppose God to be strictly infinite: not finite, not determinate, in any way. That God exists, with 'God' taken to stand for something strictly infinite, is the doctrine I shall for convenience call existence-theism, in which we may at bottom assert:

- 1) Something exists, without existing in any determinate mode of existence, and
- 2) If 'God' is to stand for anything, it is to stand for the simply existent of 1).

By 'God' we may thus refer determinately to something, not only by referring to something of a determinate kind, but also by referring to something which—precisely because, though exacting, it is not determinate in any way—cannot be confounded with anything else. Not with nothing, since no existent can be confounded with nothing. Not with anything determinate in any way, for a simply existent is not determinate in any way. All that is left, is something not determinate in any way, and a simply existent can be nothing else. It cannot be confounded with itself, it *is* itself. If there is any simply existent, there logically cannot be more than one of it, or any internal division within it. This means that there is no room for vagueness or indeterminacy of reference, in whatever attempts we may make to refer to it. The only reason for which our purported references to a simply existent could possibly fail, is where there would be none to refer to. In the unique case of the simply existent,

if there is one, natural speech can safely be used to refer to the simply existent. Only the 'standing for' relation is even applicable in the case. Where there is no simply existent, 'God' will be empty, and 'God exists' false. Where there is one, 'God' (or no matter what other "name" by which we may wish to refer to the simply existent) has no way of failing, and 'God exists' cannot be either false, or true of anything but the simply existent.⁴

If it was a form of existence-theism which Hume had in mind when he expressly left 'the Being of a God' undisputed, more than once, he could hardly have felt any need to dispute it. The core of existence-theism—the conjunction of 1) and 2)—quite obviously 'affords no Inference that affects human Life, or can be the source of any Action or forbearance' (*Dialogues ... Pt 12, ad fin.*): and that was what he very much wanted to establish. It was no threat to him, if someone wanted to say that God existed, provided that absolutely nothing impinging on our doings here and now could possibly follow from it. In particular, of course, the core of existence-theism by itself affords no inference to the effect that God is omnipotent, or good, where these in turn have implications of consequence to us, and are more than, say, mere expressions of a sentiment. Just how such attributions are to be made sense of, consistently with the core of existence-theism, and how any theology worth the name is then possible, are obvious *prima facie* problems for those who would maintain a form of existence-theism. In the study noted at note 4 above, I treat attributions to God as "systematically misleading" in specifiable ways, and permit as premisses in theology only those attributions whose analyses can be maintained consistently with maintaining a rigorously negative theology on the divine nature. (Within the analyses, and hence within the putatively explanatory discourse of theology, the only notion of existence required is a quite standard post-Fregean notion.) In the meantime the following should be said.

Existence-theism is unfashionable among academic theists today. For that reason, doubtless, it is largely ignored by their critics. It had already become unfashionable among the Deists known to Hume. Yet it is a position of historical importance. As Hume's Demea acknowledged, its rigorously negative theology on the divine nature had been the view of 'all the Divines almost, from the Foundation of Christianity' up to quite modern times. It is a position important still to many ordinary worshippers. In the article in which he drew attention to the notion of blissful freedom, Flew arguably correctly identified a view with a form of existence-theism at its core, as 'the Roman Catholic account of the universe and its Creator' (art. cit., p.159).

If we may suppose existence-theism here—and it might have to be presupposed in order to guarantee the peculiar security ascribed to blissful freedom—we may pursue some consequences.

1 First, we will have to recognise that it would be absurd to credit something supposed not determinate in any way, with any determinate, non-relational properties. There is then no place in an existence-theist's programme for a theodicy of precisely the kind that has become classical from the days of Wolff, on the Continent, or the Deists in the British Isles. There is no place, in particular, for defending the proposition that God is both omnipotent and good, where that is understood to imply that non-relational omnipotence and moral (or other strongly evaluative) goodness are compatible attributes of the divine nature, where attributes are understood as what significant predicates designate. Initially, then, an existence-theist may positively welcome the destructive work of Blunt Commentators, in its intended destruction of the classical theodicist's case. He may find it disappointing to recognise failure in the Blunt Commentator's argument. Had it gone through, that argument would have been eliminating a professed form of theism which in an existence-theist's eyes is offering at best a false God.

2 Yet an existence-theist will want to defend 'God is both omnipotent and good' in a sense he can consistently maintain—a sense, too, in which your average Blunt Commentator is still not going to like it.

Let us take the attribution of goodness as "systematically misleading": perhaps precisely as a famous existence-theist did take it. Unlike the theodicists of character-theism, we must not seek to understand 'God is good' in the way we might be inclined to understand 'Socrates is good'. Rather, we may understand it as meaning:

That which we call goodness in creatures, pre-exists in God (Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1/13/2).

In the analysis 'God', if it refers at all, is to be understood to refer (obliquely) to the simply existent: Aquinas's God is notoriously in no species or genus. And in the analysis 'good', if it is to signify anything, is to signify descriptive goodness merely, and of a kind we can understand. Why that? Attributions of the form 'God is—' are susceptible of a true analysis of this type, acceptable as a premiss within a putatively explanatory discourse of theology, only where the slot-filler does not necessarily imply an applicability restricted to things of a certain kind only. 'Good', when understood as 'descriptively good', is thus acceptable. 'Red' is not, if only things with real or apparent surfaces can be red. Neither is 'good' when understood as carrying strongly evaluative loading of any kind; as when most notably it is intended to carry the

sense of 'morally good'. Only things of a kind determinate enough to exist, or "things" of the mind determinate enough to be thought possible to exist, can logically be said to be good (or not) when 'good' is being taken to carry strongly evaluative force. (QX 5)

3 In place of a classical theodicy, then, what an existence-theist will need to argue for, is that the world in which we live is, despite many appearances, such as to be ultimately ordered so as not to be capable of becoming (again) disordered; whether or not we ourselves can in practice perceive it as ordered. And what someone arguing against existence-theism will need to argue, is that ultimately we live not as part of any ultimate order, but as things within at most a sum of things; or that at least some of the obvious descriptive evils around us cannot even in principle be integrated into an ultimate order of the kind supposed by existence-theists.

4 For serious discussion of divine existence or divine "attributes" then, not two but at least three possible positions have to be kept in mind — two are character-theism and existence-theism. The third has to be able to challenge both, and not only the first.

Hume arguably recognised this. In the *Dialogues*, character-theism was argued by Cleanthes, existence-theism by Demea. The third position was provided by Philo, sceptical towards both. Modern writers often mean to be more than merely sceptical. Professors Mackie and Flew surely did. Yet the Blunt Commentator's argument, which Mackie expressly used, and Flew (unintentionally) helped existence-theists to block, by drawing attention to the possibilities of blissful freedom, proved too narrowly focussed on a character-theist problematique, and of its related theodicy. Existence-theism may be unfashionable, but we ignore it at our peril. Not only in theodicies or other treatments of evil, but in arguing against these.

- 1 Some of the sharpest critics of theodicy favour a Blunt Commentator's argument. One is found expressly in J. L. Mackie, 'Evil and omnipotence', *Mind* 64 (1955) 200–12, 209.
- 2 A. Flew, 'Divine omnipotence and human freedom', in A. Flew & A. MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London [1955], xii + 274pp., 144–69, 155.
- 3 Hume did not care for this other way, though in Pt 9 he treats it on a couple of pages (215–16 of the 1976 Price edn). When his character Demea puts it forward, it is in a manner of expression already biased towards character-theist concerns. Yet when Cleanthes argues against it, his argument is not allowed to rest on a contentiously empiricist premiss only. Demea argues for the existence of a being 'who cannot be suppos'd not to exist without an express Contradiction' (p.215). Cleanthes replies that 'the Words..., necessary Existence have no Meaning; or, which is the same thing, none

that is consistent' (p.216). The words italicized (by Hume) indeed have no meaning within the Way of Ideas. But 'none that is consistent' permits the objection raised by Cleanthes to be shared by at least some who might not have wished to accept his then fashionable empiricist criterion for meaning.

- 4 In *Infinite God: The central issue addressed by existence-theism*, forthcoming, I spend some chapters (of philosophy of language and metaphysics, chiefly) to explain how precisely it is that the existence-theist's core contentions need not be incoherent, and are at least possible to be said with truth. More briefly I expound the ways in which 'God is both omnipotent and good' might likewise be said with truth by an existence-theist. For examples of medieval Schoolmen's use of similar modes of analysis, for attributions to divine power in particular, see L. Moonan, *Divine Power: The medieval Power Distinction up to its adoption by Albert, Bonaventure and Aquinas*, Oxford 1994, xi + 396pp., passim. In our day treatments of divine goodness, and how the obvious evils around us can or cannot be accommodated, within an existence-theist perspective, are not in evidence. Even a philosopher who opens a chapter on divine goodness with a crisp and essentially clear outline of such a treatment almost immediately leaves it aside, saying: '... I shall not consider this position in any detail. Instead, I shall concentrate on the issues surrounding the claim that God is morally good.'—save, so far as any prominence goes, the issue of whether such a claim even can be made without absurdity, where God is supposed not to be in any way finite. See G. J. Hughes, *The Nature of God*, London 1995, p.152.

- 5 A consistent existence-theist can certainly seek to argue that what we call goodness in creatures (or, what can be seen to be ultimately ordered so as not to be capable of becoming (again) disordered) is in addition morally admirable; just as he might argue that there is a lot of it, or that even parts of it are big. But just as he cannot use 'is such that there is a lot of it' or 'is in parts big' in an analysis that could permit theologians to use 'The divine nature is in parts big' or '... is such that there is a lot of it', he likewise cannot use 'This ordered entity is morally admirable (or, is morally deplorable)', or 'This whole order of things is morally admirable (or, is morally deplorable)' as a premiss within a putatively explanatory theology, or to justify 'God is morally admirable (or, is morally deplorable)'. See *ST* 1/6/3 ad 3; 1d. 21q. 1. 1. fi; Ver qu 2, 3 ad 1b

The point here has nothing especially to do with either theology or morals. It is that some predicates (say, 'is descriptively good', 'is wise') express integral "forms" which are not inherently limited to instantiation in a restricted range of kinds of thing, and can thus be used to provide "scientifically" usable analyses of 'God is good', 'God is wise' where 'God' is being taken to refer to the simply existent, if there is one. Other predicates express integral "forms" instantiable only in limited things, or limited ranges of things: and cannot be used to provide the theologian with analyses of the kind he needs.

As to the distinction between 'good' as used in a narrowly moral sense, as against the sense needed for the descriptive goodness of something's fitness for a purpose, or of some technical performance, that is not at all arcane. A widely sold seaside postcard used to show a young lady emerging from the bushes, cheeks flushed, hair slightly out of place. With analytical precision she says to the young man with her: 'Mummy told me I was to be good. Was I?'