

in a rather different way, if we compare nineteenth-century Africa with tenth-century Europe, there would be a number of African areas which could show larger political units and greater volumes of commerce than much of tenth-century Europe, but technically tenth-century Europe was ahead, with water mills and wheels as well as the plough².

The Children of Woot can indeed be read, as Vansina surely wishes it to be, as evidence that the African inheritance includes acting on history as well as being its victim, economic expansion and statecraft as well as music and sculpture. But it can also be read as suggesting that many features of to-day's "dependent capitalism" in Africa, even though fostered by the abundant selfishness and shortsightedness of colonial administrations, have their roots in the precolonial period. History, as William James decided long ago, is a discipline for those with the tough-mindedness to live with the ambiguities of the past.

- 1 University of Wisconsin Press—William Dawson & Sons Ltd., Madison and Folkestone, 1978, pp xi, 394, £21.
- 2 For a discussion of the social bases of the development of European technology which made the colonial empires possible, see Carlo M. Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion*, Penguin Books, 1970.

Freedom, Evil and Farrer

Brian Hebblethwaite

A revised version of a paper presented in 1983 at the third Oxford conference on the theology of Austin Farrer.

Freedom has a central place in Christian anthropology. We may begin our consideration of the notion, somewhat idealistically, by focusing attention on the most exalted sense of freedom, which, according to Christian tradition, is that of man's true freedom in relation to the God who made him. This true freedom may be defined as the spontaneity of unrestricted and undistorted love, as man realises his true nature as a creature made in the image of God. In the end, in the consummation of all things in the life of heaven, the creature will for ever exercise this true freedom, in both thought and action, as the love of God, now unambiguously manifest, elicits the free, the spontaneous response of love in the communion of saints.

Such a conception of man's true freedom raises many theological

and philosophical problems. The most important theological problem is that of the relation between grace and free will. Indeed, the free will spoken of by contrast with grace appears to have little in common with the true freedom which is the fruit of grace. According to the dominant stands of Christian anthropology, man is not free to realise his true freedom. On the contrary, he is in bondage and can only be freed by grace. On this view man's free will is very limited indeed. The main philosophical problem with this conception of man's true freedom is whether such freedom of spontaneity presupposes a more basic liberty of indifference whereby man is able to opt for any one of a range of genuine alternatives, not only equally good alternatives, but good and bad alternatives as well.

On this latter question, the philosophical theologian is in something of a quandary. For another important topic has to be remembered at this point, namely the problem of evil. The crucial place of the 'free will defence' in theodicy requires a strong doctrine of free will, in the sense of liberty of indifference, against all forms of determinism, and this appears to clash not only with the disparagement of man's free will that one finds in a theology of grace such as Luther's, but also with the supposition that in the end man's true freedom in dependence on God's grace will not be such as seriously to imply the possibility of falling away again, that is, of opting for a bad alternative instead of a good.

The question thus arises: can Christian theology achieve a consistent treatment of the topic of freedom, which does justice both to the necessity of the free will defence in theodicy and to the conception of man's true freedom, under grace, as the spontaneity of undistorted love?

The materials for such a consistent theology of freedom can, I think, be found in the writings of Austin Farrer. But, curiously, we do not find the synthesis itself. For, although Farrer wrote wisely and at length on both the freedom of the will and the problem of evil, and also dealt in masterful fashion with the problem of grace and free will, he made surprisingly little use of the free will defence in theodicy. Indeed, the failure of the Gifford lecturer on *The Freedom of the Will* to deploy and defend the free will defence in the Nathaniel Taylor lectures on *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* is one of the most puzzling features of the Farrer corpus.

My own treatment of these topics here will concentrate on the issue of theodicy and the place of the free will defence therein. I shall consider the more recent work by Hick, Plantinga and Mackie, in the light of Farrer's writings on the freedom of the will and on theodicy, and only at the end return to the problem of grace and free will and to the nature of man's true freedom.

In brief, the free will defence runs as follows: the reason why

there is wickedness and moral evil in a world created by omnipotent benevolence is that God permits it just because he values and intends there to be human persons. Human personal and inter-personal life necessarily involve significant freedom of thought and action, including the freedom to act well or badly. It is logically impossible, even for omnipotence, to ensure that significantly free human creatures always choose the good.

In what will surely become the standard text-book of theoretical atheism, J.L. Mackie's posthumously published *The Miracle of Theism*, Mackie subjects the free will defence to careful criticism. While conceding that it is nonsense to suppose that God could *make* men *freely* choose the good—that would involve a straight contradiction—he argues that it is quite coherent to suppose that God could have made beings (whether human or not—the qualification is significant) *such that* they would always freely choose the good. He does so by urging the compatibility of determinism and freedom. It is quite conceivable, he says, that a being's desires were caused to be such that he always freely pursued the good and that a being's rational beliefs were always caused in a proper way by confrontation with the facts. Mackie rejects the free will defence in theodicy precisely because he does not think that moral freedom and rational freedom do presuppose the contra-causal 'liberty of indifference' that libertarians have said they do.

One answer to Mackie may be extracted from the more recent writings on this topic by John Hick. Hick admits that creatures might have been placed in what he calls a 'morally frictionless environment' in which there was nothing to prevent them always thinking rationally and always acting well. But such creatures, Hick suggests, would be less valuable than those whose personalities and characters are built up over a life of hard struggle, whose choice of the good is genuinely at risk and who are confronted at every stage by real alternatives and pressures pulling them (though not irresistibly) in different directions. Specifically human values can only be realised in such a world where persons learn to fashion their own lives and relationships under the inspiration rather than the automatic stimulus of the good. And, as Hick puts it, 'it is logically impossible to create beings already in a state of having come into that state by their own free choices'.

I think there is much truth in this reply. But we might well wonder whether there is not the possibility of a stronger answer being given, one that involves an outright rejection of compatibility between free will and determinism. For it is not at all clear that Mackie's creatures, made such that their desires are always fixed on the good and their rational beliefs always caused by the facts, are persons at all, let alone human persons, realising specifically human values. The notion of rational beliefs *caused*, in a uniquely determining way, by the facts is a

very peculiar one. Does not thought involve transcendence over every causal process, the ability to stand back and survey arguments and relevant considerations, and assess proposals for belief for their truth or arguments for their validity? We are responsible for such assessments. They cannot just be matters of reaction to stimuli. And as for creatures whose inbuilt desires have always disposed them infallibly to act well, would they be persons at all? Does not Hick's insistence on the achievement of personhood through struggle and choice between open possibilities point to the necessary conditions of becoming and being a finite person as such, not just a human being?

It is in this connection that we can call on Farrer's refutation of determinism in *The Freedom of the Will*. In that book, Farrer expounds with great care and sophistication the nature of voluntary action and of the capacities of rational agents 'to think, deliberate, resolve, execute, persevere'. He shows how our will, expressed in our act, is not itself an antecedent cause of an event, to be explained by reference to further antecedent causes, but rather a matter of rational choice over which we, the agent, have control. 'A decision is not something we fulfil, it is something we create' (p. 121). And Farrer insists that this is true not only of indifferent choices like which of two equally important letters to write first, nor only of difficult moral choices, like whether to become a pacifist (these examples are my own), but even of clearly predictable and unimpeded choice: 'What can be more voluntary', he says, 'than a project with nothing against it, immediately seized by the whole energy of our will; when, for example, on a day of leisure, we embrace an invitation to visit the person whom we love?' (p. 111). We might add again that this is equally true of human rationality, of our working out a solution to a problem, or of our careful weighing of the merits and demerits of alternative policies.

The mistake of some libertarians in narrowing down the scope of significant freedom to important moral decisions was pointed out by Farrer later in the book: 'Any libertarian edifice which narrows its base, and builds on privileged decisions, moral or otherwise, is doomed to fall. For once we admit that most decisions are determined, we cannot resist the contention that all may be' (p. 269).

Farrer was well aware that the libertarian must not overstate his case. As he puts it in his article on 'Free Will in Theology' in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, 'the defender of free will...must not deny the validity of causal-regularity interpretations as far as they go; but he will maintain that we have no reason to suppose, and much reason to disbelieve that the grid of natural uniformity fits so tightly upon living processes as to deny scope to free personal action'.

The crucial factor in understanding what it is to be a person, then, is recognition that, for all our conditioning by heredity,

environment (history, culture or society), it is we who make of all this what we will; we are responsible not only for what we think and do in given situations, but for the sort of people we become.

The free will defence, it will be remembered, was advanced to explain the presence of moral evil in a world created by an all-powerful, all-loving God. It holds that the creation of a world of finite persons entails the possibility of their freely choosing evil, since genuine choice, where one could have done otherwise, is of the essence of personal life. And the necessary condition of the creation of a world of finite persons—a regularly structured, morally ambiguous environment—is bound to present ‘persons in the making’ with temptation as well with inspiration. It is interesting that Mackie treats our human tendency mistakenly to embrace evil as good as part of the problem of natural evil, again as though we could not help our mistakes and our perversities. It is true that the nature of the world will help to explain our folly and wrong choice. But such folly and wrong are no more inevitable than is our wise embracing of the good. Whatever the pressures may be, most men and women, short of pathological illness, are responsible for what they do and for what they become.

When we return to Farrer’s *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, we find, to our surprise, that it is almost entirely concerned with the problem of physical or natural suffering rather than with the problem of moral evil. Certainly it also contains very interesting treatment of sin and redemption, but not in connection with the free will defence, and indeed, as we shall see in a moment, what Farrer says about original sin might be thought to be giving hostages to Mackie—such is Farrer’s conviction of the distorting influences to which the growing rational creature is subjected by society and culture. But the bulk of *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* constitutes a careful examination of the necessities involved in the fashioning of a world of creatures out of basic energies, each endowed with its own natural powers. ‘I think that God’s creation begins from below with a chaos of non-rational forces, each acting of itself with inexhaustible energy; and I view the degree of order and the complication of structure which Providence has drawn from these beginnings as a miracle of patient overruling’ (p. 147). The inevitability of accident in such a system of interacting systems is stressed, as well as the characteristically Farrerian idea of the hidden hand of God shaping the providential story of life without violating the nature of each individual creature.

John Hick, in a chapter now deleted from the second edition of his *Evil and the Love of God*, describes Farrer’s book as representing a basically ‘Augustinian’ approach, with considerable ‘Irenaean’ modifications. (I take it that Hick’s distinction between ‘Augustinian’ and ‘Irenaean’ theodicies is sufficiently familiar not to require

explanation). In fact the balance is very much the other way. Farrer's theodicy is, in Hick's terminology, basically 'Irenaean' and all the main features of Hick's own theodicy are already there in Farrer, including the idea of the physical universe as a necessary screen between God and creatures enabling them to keep their 'distinction from God, and not fall straight back into the lap of creating power'. It is true that Farrer tells two contrasting stories to indicate possible theodicies, one 'Augustinian', the other 'Irenaean'. But he ends up rejecting the Augustinian parable in a way he does not reject the Irenaean one, despite the tongue-in-cheek qualifications he characteristically adds. Farrer's treatment of animal pain and physical accident quite clearly presuppose an Irenaean approach.

If we put together Farrer's rejection of compatibilism in *The Freedom of the Will* and his basically Irenaean theodicy in *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, we find ourselves equipped with a more powerful reply to Mackie than Hick is able give, with his concession to the possibility of a 'morally frictionless environment', where compatibilism might in fact be true. It is clear that Farrer is experimenting with the stronger view that building us up from below through a world of interacting energies is the necessary condition of God's creating a community of persons to be raised to eternal life in the end. Moreover it is clear that he thinks that freedom is of the essence of rational personal life. Why then does he not build the free will defence into his theodicy?

In fact his train of thought almost leads him in the opposite direction. In the chapter on 'Adam and Lucifer', having rejected literal belief in the devil, Farrer goes on to affirm a modified belief in original sin, though as a cultural rather than a natural fact of man's condition. In making the point he goes so far as to say that we may be the helpless victims of the corrupting influences of our cultural heritage, and that we are not responsible for this. However, this determinist picture (surely incompatible with the Gifford Lectures on *The Freedom of the Will*) is qualified at two points. First, regarding our condition in this life, he points out that while we may not be responsible for the false orientation in which our will is set, we are responsible for its continued hold on us, and for our failure to correct it (p. 150). And, secondly, regarding the future of man, he supposes that, beyond the grave, all men and women will be confronted unambiguously by Christ and the redeemed and none will be found unable to respond but by their own fault (p. 130). So free will is maintained, as we should expect.

As to why the free will defence is not deployed in *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, I can only suppose that Farrer thought the problem of physical suffering and natural evil to be much the greater problem for the reflective Christian mind. And he was content to leave

the free will defence implicit in his picture of the necessary conditions of the fashioning of rational, talking, creaturely persons in a physical world, persons destined to be redeemed, and immortalised in a community of love. For, as we shall see, Farrer understands man's discovery of his true freedom as a matter of freely allowing his own will to be embraced by the divine will in grace and succour.

It is worth pausing here to consider the sharp attack on the plausibility of 'Irenaeus' theodicies made by Mackie in the aforementioned *The Miracle of Theism*. Mackie thought it useless in theodicy to appeal to causal necessities, since an omnipotent God would not need to use means to attain his ends. 'So it is idle to refer, in a theodicy, to any ordinary, factual, means-end, or in general causal, relationships'. This seems to demolish at a stroke any view which regards the physical universe as instrumental to God's purposes in creating a community of persons. But I think Mackie fails to notice the logical necessities consequent upon the causal necessities to which both Hick and Farrer refer. It is logically impossible to have a system of interacting physical systems flexible enough to produce living beings which is not at risk to accidental clashes. For it is the same law-governed system of systems that has it in it both to produce life and to come into chance conflicts. Of course it is logically possible for God to intervene, but again each intervention would set in motion another causal chain requiring further interventions, and the point of making the creature make itself, to use Farrer's phrase, would be lost. Farrer himself has an interesting comment on the sense in which God *uses* natural causes to bring about his purposes. Every created agency has its own inherent value. God does not create something merely for its oblique utility to other purposes. 'Every natural agent must find its justification in the action to which it naturally conduces' (p.92). Out of these natural agencies God draws new levels of created being, which can only exist as what they are when thus elicited. In each case 'God uses creaturely powers straight', yet draws them into the service of purposes quite beyond their several inherent scopes. Mackie, it might be argued, overlooks the fact that it is *logically* impossible to have a world of specifically human values—and perhaps of finite personal life as such—without its being rooted in some such evolving world as this.

I should next like briefly to compare Farrer's work on freedom and evil with that of the most notable exponent of the free will defence in recent philosophy of religion, Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga defines free will as follows: 'If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action or that he will not. It is within his power, at the time in question to perform the action, and within his power to refrain'.

Plantinga argues, with exemplary rigour, that if man is endowed with such freedom, then it is logically impossible even for an omnipotent God to actualise a world in which such creatures always act well; for, though it is logically possible that they should always act well, the power to do so is something given over to the creature; and God cannot at the same time ensure, either directly or indirectly, that that transferred power is always exercised for the good. The notion that God can actualise any logically possible state of affairs is dubbed by Plantinga 'Leibniz's lapse', and he has no difficulty in showing its incoherence. He goes on to argue that it may be the case that every possible person suffers from what he calls 'transworld depravity', that is, it may be the case that any free creature will or must, sooner or later, act badly; in which case every possible world of free persons created by God will contain moral evil. Moreover, since it is logically possible that natural evil is the result of the devil's action, all evil may be explicable by means of the free will defence.

I think that Farrer's theodicy, though less rigorously argued than Plantinga's, is much the more realistic and plausible theodicy. Farrer and Plantinga are both libertarians; both would concur in opposing Mackie's compatibilism. But Farrer argues the case for a libertarian position. He does not assume it, as Plantinga does. Both Farrer and Plantinga would reject Hick's concession to Mackie over the possibility of a world of free persons always acting well in a morally frictionless environment. But Farrer is better placed to reject Mackie on this than is Plantinga. For Farrer provides a reason why liberty of indifference is necessary in the first stages of the creation of persons, namely, the necessity of the building up of creatures from below in a morally ambiguous environment. This Irenaean theodicy, in other words, makes moral evil much more understandable than does Plantinga's bare assertion of liberty of indifference. At the same time it enables Farrer to explain natural evil much more plausibly than by appeal to the devil. Indeed Farrer's strong case for disbelief in the devil renders this aspect of Plantinga's theodicy more suspect than ever.

Farrer would have agreed with Plantinga over 'Leibniz's lapse'. It is not logically possible for God to actualise a world containing only moral good, if that good is dependent on the free action of creatures. But would he have agreed with Plantinga over 'transworld depravity'? The answer to that question depends on how we understand Plantinga. If, as seems to be the case, Plantinga is really supposing that maybe any possible person is *bound* to act badly sooner or later, then Farrer would certainly not have agreed with him. Such a possibility would entail a doctrine even more extreme than Calvin's doctrine of total depravity; for, on Calvin's view, man might not have fallen in the first place. And it is hard to see how 'transworld

depravity', in this strong sense, fits in with Plantinga's own libertarian position. A much more sensible suggestion, which Farrer might well have accepted, would be to say that, maybe, every created person will, of his own free will, as a matter of fact, act badly. It may turn out that any and every creature, endowed by God with liberty of indifference, will, sooner or later, go wrong. I think that Farrer could have agreed with this. But even such a mild version of 'transworld depravity' is less plausible than Farrer's actual treatment of original sin, embedded as it is in his Irenaean view of the conditions under which alone personhood can be fashioned.

Mackie's criticism of Plantinga's notion of transworld depravity is to ask how is it possible that every creature should suffer from this malady. That would be to confront God with a limited range of possible people to create—an incoherent suggestion where omnipotence is concerned. One might think that such a criticism would apply both to Plantinga's strong version of transworld depravity and to the milder, more plausible, version. But the milder version, at least, can be defended against this criticism. Once again, Mackie seems to be overlooking the logical constraints on the creation of persons with libertarian free will. It is only because of his compatibilism that Mackie can envisage the easy creation of finite persons endowed with natures such that they always act well. But if libertarian free will is a necessary condition of the creation of finite persons, then it may be logically impossible to avoid the possibility of transworld depravity at least in the milder sense.

We must now come back from the philosophical problem of free will and determinism as it affects the theodicy issue to the theological problem of grace and free will mentioned at the beginning of this paper. There is no doubt that our defence of free will in the interests of theodicy will incline us to sympathise with Erasmus against Luther in the debate over the reality and value of natural freedom. But again it is Farrer's treatment of the grace and free will issue, in the paper on 'Grace and the Human Will', reprinted in *Reflective Faith*, and in the chapter on 'Grace and Free Will' in *Faith and Speculation*, that enables us to see how the danger of Pelagianism is to be avoided. Farrer makes it clear that divine grace and human freedom are not rivals. We are certainly not authors or earners of our own salvation. But neither are we totally passive recipients of salvation, whether we will or no. Rather, God's action in us is most vividly experienced when we, with all our powers of thought and action, freely embrace the love that made us. It is our God-given nature to find our true freedom—to realise the spontaneity of undistorted love, as I put it at the beginning—precisely in freely giving ourselves to be the vehicles of divine grace. Notice how this differs from Mackie's suggestion that God might have given us a nature such that we just always did act

well. By contrast, our God-given nature is such that we learn to realise the spontaneity of love in freely submitting ourselves to divine grace. It is certainly in dependence on the prior gracious activity of God that we find our true freedom. But only free persons, endowed with liberty of indifference and not totally conditioned by social and cultural pressures—persons, moreover, whose personhood has necessarily been fashioned through learning and decision in a morally ambiguous environment—only such persons can give themselves to the gracious action of God in and upon them, and thus be the recipients of saving grace.

Finally we may consider the way in which a strong Irenaean theodicy, such as that sketched by Farrer in *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, can enable us to solve the problem of the relation between the present phase of the creative process, where liberty of indifference means freedom to do good or evil, with a serious risk of evil being chosen, and the future goal of creation, where creatures who have been enabled by divine grace to realise the spontaneity of unrestricted and undistorted love have found their true freedom in perpetually yielding themselves to the promptings of the love that made them. In this perfected state the creature is no longer subject to the pressures and temptations inherent in the person-making process of life in a world of interacting and competing energies. On an Irenaean view the perfected state could not have been posited directly. Grace perfects nature, but there must first be nature to be perfected, and that is a matter of finite creatures such as ourselves becoming persons through being rooted in a world of open possibilities. As Hick says, 'it is logically impossible to create beings already in a state of having come into that state by their own free choices'. Once creatures have been talked into rationality and loved into personhood, they have become immortalisable. They could not, as even Hick supposes, have been placed in a morally frictionless environment from the start—Farrer is a surer guide than Hick on this—but once fashioned through a world of genuinely open possibilities—open for good or ill—they can be translated into the morally frictionless environment of heaven, where the perpetual spontaneity of love becomes a possibility, though even there we may suppose this to be a matter of a gracious personal relation for ever freely accepted, not an absolute constraint. But in heaven there will be no possible source of temptation away from contemplating and doing the good, such as there necessarily is in the present productive phase of the creative process.