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Mackie's Argument for the Infinite Man

Abigail Jeanne Basile

I. Introduction

Many of the issues regarding the existence of the Judeo-Christian God revolve around some contradiction between one of His necessary attributes and the existence of evil. One of the common explanations of evil's occurrence is the idea that God does not actually have omnipotence, since if He did He easily could stop evil from affecting His creation. Philosopher J. L. Mackie argues that the possibility for human beings to choose evil keeps them from being able to continually practice goodness, and thus there should not be an option for man to exercise his free will to choose evil. Instead, man should have been created so that he is guided in his free will to always choose the good, so as to avoid evil altogether. Mackie goes further to claim that since this is not man's reality, God must not be powerful enough to actualize this, and this calls His omnipotence, and thus His existence, into question. Although Mackie contends that the presence of evil is evidence for the lack of omnipotence in the Judeo-Christian God, I argue that, God, in all His power, cannot create non-finite humans that do not have natural limitations in knowledge and power. Further, if man has free will, his inevitable finitude makes the presence of evil highly probable. Therefore, the presence of evil does not challenge God's omnipotence or existence.

II. Mackie's Argument

Acclaimed philosopher J.L. Mackie gives a strong argument against the existence of God in his article "Evil & Omnipotence," stating that there is a contradiction between the existence of evil and God's attribute of omnipotence. Mackie argues that since it is logically possible for man to prefer what is good instead of what is evil and to choose it on at least one occasion, then it should not be logically contradictory for him to choose the good on all occasions.¹ If mankind has free will, which Mackie argues is the case, and if God is truly omnipotent, then it would be possible for God to guide His free agents to choose good every time, thus keeping evil out of the world and suffering apart from His creation. God's adamant effort and desire to keep evil and suffering out of the world would come from His omnibenevolence. Since there is evil and suffering, Mackie's conclusion is that God must not be able to prevent evil and suffering or He must not want to, so He is either not omnipotent, not omnibenevolent, or both. If He lacks either of these qualities, then the Judeo-Christian God does not exist.

This paper focuses on Mackie's treatment of the omnipotence and limitations of God. Mackie contends that God being all-powerful means that He is completely limitless, and this includes His dealings with mankind and its

¹ J. L. Mackie, "Evil & Omnipotence," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33.

choices.² Some theodicies portray free will as a solution to the problem of evil, concluding that evil finds its foundation in man's choices instead of God Himself. However, Mackie contends that the way God gave men and women free will sets them up for failure because it still allows individuals the ability to consciously choose evil. Instead of allowing this, God, in all His power, should have created man with the ability to *always* freely choose good over evil. If God had decided upon this option, it would keep evil out of the world and traumatic suffering would never harm mankind.

III. Regulated Free Will

Mackie does not just argue that free will is a barrier to man's ability to do good, but he goes further to say that God should have taken the initiative to create mankind with a free will that causes people to only choose the good.³ Mackie contends that free will cannot rest upon pure random volition, so there must be some kind of predictable system that guides mankind's free will. If the exercise of free will was truly random, the agent could not self-determine his or her own actions whatsoever, negating any "characteristic of the *will*."⁴ Since free will cannot be totally random, God should have made "a decision to make men... such

² Mackie, 32-33.

³ Mackie, 34-35.

⁴ Mackie, 34.

that they would always freely go right.”⁵ Such a guided free will would keep evil away and would easily be within God’s omnipotent ability in the creation of man. Because there are so many opportunities for man to fail by choosing evil, Mackie argues that the mere ability to choose evil leads inevitably to man’s sinful demise.

Paul K. Moser, a Christian theist, affirms Mackie’s point in discussing man’s inability to keep the moral law through his own efforts by saying, “Left to our own devices, of course, we are all soon dead and buried... Our self-supplied resources, cognitive and otherwise, bring us fully to naught, leaving us with no genuine hope for our own lasting future.”⁶ Moser emphasizes that man’s natural limitations deter man in his ability to accomplish a continual goodness on his own, thus man will almost inevitably face evil and suffering from his inability to continually do good. Mackie, however, assumes that God should have created mankind to only experience and produce goodness, because otherwise mankind is harmed. If left to its own means, mankind’s accomplishment of goodness is sporadic and inconsistent, so Mackie applies a point on which he and Moser agree to argue that God should provide a guide away from evil to ensure man continuously does only good.

With the type of guided free will Mackie suggests, however, one can quickly inquire whether or not this is actually *free* will. Yes, mankind would be free to

⁵ Mackie, 34.

⁶ Paul K. Moser, *The Elusive God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99.

choose the good and right choice, but it does not seem to actually be a choice if individuals are only able to choose good. Mackie is correct to assume that God is more than sufficiently omnipotent to keep mankind from choosing evil, and that would *prima facie* be beneficial for mankind to avoid suffering, but this scenario does not allow true free will. A necessary component of making a choice with free will is that there is actually a choice to make, meaning that there are two options, or even scenarios, that an individual must decide between. If God guides a person's actions so that he only decides upon the good option every time, the decision cannot be attributed to the person since there was no other option available to him. There is no choice in Mackie's version of free will, thus it cannot be considered an adequate account of free will.

Even if an individual can exert choice between varying levels of goodness, like in David Hume's world where man only experiences pleasure, the only "choice" is a default option of goodness, which commits the same fallacy identified in Mackie's argument mentioned above.⁷ Hume's world allows goodness and pleasure to be experienced, but it cannot make mankind moral. Man's utopia where he can only choose goodness and experience pleasure is theoretically ideal for the purpose of avoiding evil and suffering, but the benefits of such a world stop there. There is no robust knowledge of goodness if a person can only choose the good without weighing the consequences of evil. A person

⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 58-66.

who is able to identify evil and suffering can purposefully make a choice to not replicate it in his or her life or circumstances, therefore bettering his or her overall existence as a moral human being. Neither Hume's world nor Mackie's free will allows for this.

St. Augustine acknowledges that with free will man has the ability to choose evil over good and that choosing evil indeed produces negative consequences as well as distance in a relationship with God.⁸ However, being able to choose good over evil within free will allows one to choose the good *because* it is good, not because he or she is forced by a determined will. Augustine concludes that though God's choice to give man free will does allow the possibility for evil to occur, it also allows man the ability to practice moral goodness. Alvin Plantinga follows Augustine's lead and writes in *God, Freedom and Evil*,

“To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so... The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.”⁹

Both Augustine and Plantinga show that free will enables mankind to practice morality in the choice between good and evil, and this is more beneficial than

⁸ Augustine of Hippo, *On Free Choice Of The Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1993), 64.

⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 30.

always being forced to do good. For people to be morally good, it would mean that they exercise reasoning to make self-conscious choices in favor of the good over the evil. It is within the omnipotence of God to create beings incapable of moral evil, but He cannot force them to be morally good.

IV. The Turning Point in Mackie's Argument

Freedom allows one to make an intentional decision in choosing to act based on the goodness of an action, so that one chooses the action *because* it is good. Mackie's argument revolves around the idea that since man, acting within his free will, can choose the good and right choice on at least one occasion, it logically follows that man could choose the good and right choice on every occasion.¹⁰

Mackie writes,

“I should ask this: If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right.”¹¹

If mankind naturally prefers to do what is morally good, it would seem that God should curve their free will to always choose the good. According to Mackie, God

¹⁰ Mackie, 33.

¹¹ Mackie, 33.

is theoretically powerful enough to influence man's free will and have him always *prefer* the right choice, making him more inclined to do it. Mackie thinks that, intrinsically, individuals want to practice goodness, but their limited ability to actualize this in their finitude is the cause of their practicing evil.

Though Mackie's argument may initially seem valid, there are details that prove Mackie's argument to be quite unsound. He argues that there are times within free will where people "sometimes prefer what is good," and makes a leap to say that the internal desire for good can cause a man to *actually* choose the good every time.¹² This lofty assertion makes assumptions about man's abilities that are contrary to what is actually possible within his finitude. The problem with Mackie's argument is that he thinks too highly of man and too little of God. To explain man's lack of abilities within his finitude, there first needs to be an examination of God's infinity.

V. God's Limited Infinity

Two of the essential attributes of the theistic God is that He is both infinite and necessary for the existence of all contingent beings, including mankind. Some view God's being infinite as a negative attribute for God to have due to an obvious disconnection between Him and His finite creation. Just as the beauty of a music piece speaks directly of the talent of its composer, all of creation is supposed to speak directly of the abilities of its Creator. However, philosopher

¹² Mackie, 33.

Roger Montague and physicist Richard Dawkins both look at the world and claim that if it did have a Creator, He is inept, limited, and His creation does not reflect any omnipotence. Dawkins argues in *The God Delusion* that any existing complexity demands its source to be found in an even greater complexity, which leads him to argue that the theory of an infinite, complex, “end-all-be-all” God is extremely unlikely.¹³ He says that all of creation is a poor excuse for showing the magnitude of God, especially the characteristic of His omnipotence. Nothing finite can remotely give the appropriate reflection of the infinite. Montague writes that if God’s very creation is supposed to imitate Him, then God seems weak, limited, and susceptible to destruction.¹⁴ The most tangible things that can and should reflect God’s power make Him seem the opposite of omnipotent. In these arguments, Dawkins and Montague seem to suggest that the only creation appropriate to reflect the work of an infinite creator must also be infinite and perfect.

The problem with this argument is that to create anything that would adequately reflect His magnitude, God would have to create an identical version of Himself. This is impossible based on the definition of what it means to be created. The created god would immediately differ from the actual God since he

¹³ Richard Dawkins. *The God Delusion*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade & Reference Publishers, 2008), 138-9.

¹⁴ Roger Montague. “Dawkin’s Infinite Regress,” *Philosophy* 83, no. 323 (2008): 113-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20185290>.

would be as contingent and finite as any other creation. All created things are necessarily finite, therefore it is impossible for God to create the infinite.

A theistic argument claiming there to be logical limits in God's omnipotence is neither inappropriate nor a contradiction. Theist Ronald Nash argues that God is a factually necessary being, meaning that without God's factuality the laws of the universe go on unexplained.¹⁵ God's omnipotence is often thought of as truly unlimited, but Nash argues that His omnipotence should be conceived with natural limitations. God is able to will and do anything that does not involve a contradiction in the laws of nature that He instantiated. For example, if God created a married bachelor, He would be creating something that is logically contradictory to the definition of what a bachelor is. This is not to argue that God is unable to do unprecedented miracles in nature that are out of the ordinary, but that there are natural limitations based on the definitional function of certain things. Man being *created* necessitates his finitude, and creaturehood is essential to the definition of man. Man could not be man without also being finite. The fact that man is unable to use infinite knowledge, power, and goodness to avoid practicing evil is not evidence of God's lack of omnipotence but is evidence of man's existence. Within all of God's infinite power, He cannot create a finite man with infinite abilities in knowledge, power, and goodness.

¹⁵ Ronald H Nash, *The Concept Of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1983), 37.

Thomas Aquinas goes further to argue that these definitional essences in creation are eternal as they are derived from the mind and nature of God. Thomas writes, “Just as in every artificer there pre-exists a type of the things that are made by his art, so too in every governor there must pre-exist the type of the order of those things that are to be done by those who are subject to his government.”¹⁶ The essences of each created thing come from God who “bears the character of law,” so that the things He created are a direct correlation to His nature as the “artificer.”¹⁷ If God created outside of these laws, He would be creating in a way that contradicts His very being, which, if He is infinite and immutable, is contradictory altogether. It is impossible for infinite to *create* infinite. God created consistently according to the laws of nature He instantiated because it is in congruence with His nature.

VI. Man’s Infinite Finitude

Mackie’s main frustration seems to be that God did not create mankind to always choose the good and right choice in every circumstance. Because God did not do this, mankind experiences evil and suffering that any good God would want His creation to avoid completely. To Mackie, God is not powerful enough to guide man’s free will towards the good, and God is not good enough to keep His

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologica, Question 93, Article 1" – *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, last modified 2005, accessed May 9, 2018. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.FS_Q93_A1.html.

¹⁷ Aquinas, Question 93, Article 1.

creation away from suffering, therefore He must not exist. However, it is not clear that the limitations imposed by the nature of humanity allow humans the capacity to always choose the good. If man were to use his free will so that he *actually* chooses the good and right choice every time, it would require that he have perfect knowledge of what is good and perfect power so that he can actually do the good. By the term perfect, it is implied that there is a level of infinity within both qualities of knowledge and power. Man must have all the knowledge needed to identify the good choice, and all the power so that, as long as it is actually possible, man can accomplish the good choice before him. Infinite knowledge would be necessary so that the good could be known as inherently good in *all* possible worlds and at *all* possible times. The infinite power to implement the good would be necessary lest man be unable to actualize the good.

As discussed earlier, God cannot create in a way that follows certain laws of nature at one point and then not at another. G.W. Leibniz speaks of God being the source of every essence and existent being and posits that there are metaphysical necessities in logical laws that God has both defined and adhered to in creation.¹⁸ Leibniz writes, “we observe that everything in the world takes place in accordance with the laws that are eternally true, laws that are not merely geometrical, but metaphysical, that is, not only in accordance with the material

¹⁸ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Older Essays*, trans. Daniel Garber and Rodger Ariew (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 44.

necessities, but also in accordance with formal reasons.”¹⁹ Leibniz makes the observation that within science there are necessary laws of logic that must be followed in the consistency of the universe for things to function. William Hasker interacts with the idea of God’s limitations in Leibniz, saying that simply because a world may be “logically possible” does not mean that it is “actually *creatable*.”²⁰ If God created regardless of laws and order, He would be implementing a sporadic pattern of chaos that repudiates His all-knowingness, all-powerfulness, as well as all-goodness.

Whether it is the law of motion, logical necessity, or any of metaphysical necessity, there are patterned consistencies that are repetitive throughout the universe. Mankind is no exception to natural laws, but rather is actually governed by these laws. Mankind is definitionally finite, so Mackie’s demand that he practice infinity within his free will is contradictory to what man is actually able to accomplish.

VIII. Conclusion

Mackie’s argument is persuasive, but it simply asks too much of man in demanding that he function with infinite qualities within his finite nature. Since it

¹⁹ Leibniz, 45.

²⁰ William Hasker, “‘Can God Be Free?’: Rowe’s Dilemma for Theology,” *Religious Studies* 41, no. 4 (2005), 461.

is man who is necessarily limited in his ability to know and do good, it would seem a highly probable conclusion that the existence of evil is due solely to the fact that mankind is naturally unable to always make a good and right choice over an evil one within free will. The mere potential for mankind to always choose the good and right choice over an evil one cannot translate to an actual ability to do so. Just as it is impossible for a person to function outside of his nature of finitude, it is impossible for God to create any finite being with infinite capabilities. This is not because of a lack of omnipotence from God, but because it would be logically contradictory as finite man is unavoidably limited in his abilities of knowledge, power, and goodness. It seems that the presence of evil is all but inevitable if man was to operate within his truly free will, not because of God's lack of omnipotence, but because of the natural limitations of man's finitude.

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