

Avoiding the Free Will Offense

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Philosopher John Schellenberg develops an argument against those claiming, when faced with the existence of so much evil in the world, that the existence of libertarian free will makes belief in the existence of a perfectly good and almighty God rational. If there is a perfectly good and almighty God who wanted to give human beings libertarian free will, he would have waited until later in the process of (human) evolution. The existence of libertarian free will is thus a defense of atheism, rather than a defense of God. In this article the authors presents a theodicy that avoids Schellenberg's criticism. While this theodicy includes the notion of libertarian free will as one of its constitutive elements, its focus is not on the inherent value of libertarian free will. Its focus is rather on the value of a universe that is independent and indetermined from the outset. We end up showing how this framework of thinking makes it unreasonable to assume that God could have waited to give human beings libertarian free will later in the process of evolution.

Keywords: free will offense; theodicy; evolution; Schellenberg; indeterminism

Introduction

In the course of two thought provoking articles, philosopher John Schellenberg develops an argument against those claiming, when faced with the existence of so much evil in the world, that the existence of libertarian free will makes belief in the existence of a perfectly good and almighty God rational.¹ Since evolution is likely to go on for a very long time, Schellenberg finds it very plausible that human lifeforms would have used their free wills better if they had received it at a more mature stage in their evolution. Thus if there is a perfectly good and almighty God who wanted to give human beings libertarian free will, he would have waited until later in the process of (human) evolution. Human beings could have had compatibilist free will for a long period of

time in a world where everything was determined to be good, before developing libertarian free will. The existence of libertarian free will is thus a defense of atheism, rather than a defense of God.

In part one of this article we will present a theodicy that avoids Schellenberg's criticism. While this theodicy includes the notion of libertarian free will as one of its constitutive elements, its focus is not on the inherent value of libertarian free will. Its focus is rather on the value of a universe that is independent and indetermined from the outset. In part two we discuss the claim that God took a morally unacceptable risk when creating a universe with the possibility of horrendous suffering to occur. While we agree with Schellenberg that another kind of universe could have been better, we still find it

morally justifiable for a perfectly good and almighty God to create such a world for the sake of actualizing certain unique values. With this difference in emphasis on the role of libertarian free will, Schellenberg is wrong in claiming that libertarian free will counts against the existence of God. In part three we end up showing how this framework of thinking makes it unreasonable to assume that God could have waited to give human beings libertarian free will later in the process of evolution.

I

The theodicy that our critique is based upon has been worked out by Keith Ward, and further developed by Atle Ottesen Søvik.² As noted, the main point in this kind of theodicy is not that God wanted to give people free will, but that God wanted to create an independent world.³ An independent world is a world not governed in detail by God, rather it contains genuine indeterminism, which means that events may happen that not even God has foreseen.⁴ Such a world is a world with an inherent and extensive capacity for self-creation. In the words of Michael Murray, in creating our world God did not create a machine, but a machine-making machine.⁵ From the outset God fine-tuned a universe capable of bringing forth life with certain potentialities without determining which ones would be actualized. Although it could still be claimed that God had/has certain aims that he wanted/wants to actualize within the universe, God acted more like a creative artist than someone wanting to plan and control details within the developing universe.

By wanting to create an independent universe, Ward envisions God as having different kinds of overarching aims. One

such aim was to provide ontological conditions for the development of unique structures that was not determined by God but created by an indetermined self-creating universe: galaxies, dinosaurs, and flowers (etc.). Another overarching aim would be the existence of independent life-forms with which God could have a unique kind of relationship.⁶ It would be unique in virtue of being a relationship with individuals who are more independent than if God had not created such an independent world. God would know that a self-creating universe fine-tuned for life would plausibly bring forth beings complex enough for this aim to be fulfilled,⁷ yet without knowing exactly when and how. Thus, even if willed by God human beings are partly the creation of the natural world itself, and a kind of independent being with whom God can enter into a unique (communicative) relationship. Creating a world with this unique potential is good insofar as God by doing so lays the ground for certain values to be potentially actualized that could not have been so in a less independent world. In creating an independent world God sets the scene for self-conscious life-forms to develop with which he would have to share his creative power. Giving self-creative capacity to the natural world amounts to giving self-conscious life-forms greater responsibility, and so God expresses an element of trust that would not be otherwise actualized. These values could not have been actualized in a less independent world.

Even if the feeling of love is not something one chooses, one does in fact choose how to express one's love as concrete actions. Life-forms independently choosing to be in a relationship with God, is good for God in the same way as it is good for us that those we love choose being

with and for us. Actualizing this second goal has a price, however. Genuine independence requires genuine indeterminism. It would be inconsistent to say that God could have created an independent world that is determined, i.e. a world in which only one future is possible. Having said that, it would perhaps be necessary to anticipate some misunderstandings of what we have been saying so far.

We are not saying that indeterminism is a *sufficient* condition for the development of libertarian free will. What we are saying is that indeterminism is a *necessary* condition for the development of libertarian free will and independence. Nor are we saying that libertarian free will is necessary for love to be possible among humans, or that God would be manipulating us if we did not have libertarian free will. Our point is simply that genuine independence requires that God does not actively control developmental processes within the universe in detail. Having created an independent and indetermined world, not even God will know exactly what is going to happen. Indeterminism is a basic metaphysical structure in the world, which not even God can undo if he wants the world to stay highly independent.⁹ Devastating storms, genetic mutations resulting in diseases, moral agents misusing their independence to hurt others; all these natural and moral evils were at the outset possible consequences of this basic indeterminism. Although God did not want such evils to happen, he did not know which potentialities would be actualized in the created world. Yet he would have known the risk he was taking. The question is then why did not God create a risk-free world instead?

II

Ward argues that God could not have

brought us (as token individuals of this world) into a risk-free world, since we who inhabit this world are the products of this world only. Wanting to be born in another world is like wanting to have other parents. If two persons other than your actual parents had gotten a child, it would not have been you, but someone else. Likewise, if God had created another world, he could not have created you there, but someone else.¹⁰

This claim that God could only have created the token individuals of this world in this world presupposes that one does rely on a substance ontology where individuals are substances with haecceity making them the individuals they are independent of their relations. Rather, our view presupposes a relational (or structural) ontology where the identity of an individual is determined by its relations only.¹¹

Even if one accepts that individuals in different world are different, a reasonable follow-up question would be why God did not create less independent beings in a risk-free world, instead of creating us in a high-risk world. Atle Ottesen Søvik agrees with Schellenberg that a world with less freedom and less independence would have been a better world overall. If God had to choose between either making a world with less independence and without the possibility of suffering – or making a world with more independence and greater risk for suffering, he should have created one with less independence and less suffering. But Søvik suggests that God has created a world with at least two phases: one risk-free phase, which is what many Christians call "heaven" – and one high-risk phase, namely our universe (or multiverse).¹²

That God created a world with both phases is a good thing, for reasons already

noted. First, our high-risk world actualizes unique values connected to independence, and makes it possible for God to enter into relationships with independent beings. Secondly, it is also good for us who live in this high-risk world because first becoming who we are in this world is the only opportunity for the token individuals of this world to live forever with God and other created beings. Thirdly, while God took a risk in creating us the risk was acceptable, because an almighty God knew he could compensate for suffering by offering eternal bliss.¹³ Even horrendous suffering becomes merely a microscopic drop in the sea of eternity. One may object that even if God compensates for suffering, God lets people suffer without their consent. But God could not ask us before we were born, so he had to make the choice for us. This is similar to how parents choose to have children who have not been asked to be born, taking the choice for them that they will hopefully appreciate the gift of life. Since God knew that this was the only possibility for the token individuals of this world to experience eternal bliss, it was morally good for God to create our universe.

III

How then, does this theodicy avoid Schellenberg's critique that God should have given us libertarian free will later in evolution?¹⁴ First of all, Schellenberg only takes two alternatives into account: either we have compatibilist free will in a determined world, or we have libertarian free will in an indeterminated world. What we have attempted to develop above is a third alternative, namely a world genuinely indeterminated and independent at the outset. Here libertarian free will is an ontological trait that has gradually actualized

itself through evolution, as the ability for us to create an increasingly independent self which can causally influence its own choices in light of experience and reflection, and it has brought forth more independent beings than if the world had not been genuinely indeterminated from the outset.¹⁵ A necessary (but not sufficient) requirement for having libertarian free will is that the world is indeterminated. As noted above, indeterminism is the ontological condition of evil in our world. One could imagine different kinds of limited indeterminism, or indeterminism in "safer" surroundings as Schellenberg does, but the main point remains: God wanted a genuinely independent world from the outset, and thus created an indeterminated world from day one with a high-risk for evil to happen. Even if another universe could have been better, this does not make it morally unacceptable for God to create a unique universe with libertarian freedom being actualized at the particular point in time when it in fact was.

The reason why it is good for God to create this unique universe, is that it is good for God to actualize qualitatively different values. God could have of course have restricted himself to creating only one kind of individual experiencing only one kind of value, and then created many of the same. But we argue with Keith Ward that God is a God who wants many different values to be actualized.¹⁶ The existence of this unique world is good thing as long as God in addition has created at least one other world without the possibility of suffering and moral evil, and insofar as there are unique goods that can only be actualized in our kind of world and not in a universe of the kind Schellenberg envisions as the better alternative.¹⁷

Conclusion

The value of libertarian free will is not what makes it morally acceptable that God created our world. Rather, it is the *uniqueness* of this world which actualizes other values in addition to those that already exist. It is good for God to actualize qualitatively different kinds of values than those that already exist, as long as

the world he creates is on balance good. While we agree with Schellenberg that a different kind of universe could have been better compared to the one we live in, we still think that it was good of God to create both a universe without the possibility of suffering and moral evil and a universe in which the risk for suffering and moral evil to take place was high.

Notes:

1. See Schellenberg, "The Atheist's Free Will Offense" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 56, no. 1 (2004): 1-15, and John L. Schellenberg, "God, Free Will, and Time: The Free Will Offense Part II", *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 73, no. 3 (2013): 165-174. The perhaps most prominent example of someone presenting an argument for the existence of perfectly good and almighty God based the existence of libertarian free will is found in Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Power of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Schellenberg also refers to John Hick and Alvin Plantinga as advocates of such a view. See Schellenberg, "The Atheist's Free Will Offense", 10.
2. See Keith Ward, *Divine Action: Examining God's Role in an Open and Emergent Universe* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2007), and Atle O. Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
3. Ward, *Divine Action*, 67-74.
4. In this regard, our views have many common features with the theology known as open theism. While this term is often connected with the book written by Clark H. Pinnock et. al. *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994), philosophers like Ward and Swinburne has defended similar views on the relationship between God and time before the publication of that book.
5. Michael Murray, *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 184.
6. Ward, *Divine Action*, 23-36.
7. Keith Ward, *Pascal's Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding* (London: Oneworld, 2006), 53, 65. If we accept the multiverse-hypothesis, the plausibility of this eventually happening would increase.
8. We are aware that this is a controversial claim. It would be rejected by Molinists and a number of other theists, who believe that human beings have contra-causal free will. This debate is highly complex, and we are not able to give full argumentative support to our claim within the limits of this article. Here we presuppose that genuine indeterminism means that the future actually is open, i.e. that even if God did in fact possess complete knowledge of every possible world prior to the creation of our world, he did not know which world would in fact be actualized.
9. Ward, *Divine Action*, 27, 42-43.
10. Keith Ward, *God, Faith, and the New Millennium: Christian Belief in an Age of Science* (London: Oneworld, 1998), 193, and Ward, *Pascal's Fire*, 38f.
11. Due to limitations of space it is not possible here to spell out the details of this view. This can be found in the monumental work by German philosopher Lorenz B. Puntel, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, translated by Alan White (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008). For a very different approach which nevertheless defends a similar structuralist ontology, see James Ladyman et al., *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Note that here the notion of different possible worlds does not refer to how our world could have been, but to other actualized universes. It does not make sense to say that one individual could have been identical to an individual in another universe, for they would not share all properties, concerning for example their location. When, in addition, the basic conditions of life in the two different universes would be very different, individuals living in each universe would obviously also be different.
12. Søvik, *The Problem of Evil*, chapter 8.
13. This claim does not imply the controversial view that everyone will be in fact compensated this way ("universalism"), but it does imply that everyone will be given an equal opportunity to be so (which is far less controversial).
14. Schellenberg, "God, Free Will, and Time", 170ff.

15. Schellenberg's argument also presupposes that the human life-form will grow wiser and wiser as time passes. While it is true that our theoretical knowledge of the universe grows with time, moral wisdom must be learnt by every individual in every new generation. It is hard to imagine a scenario where this would not be the case.

16. Ward, *Divine Action*, 67-74.

17. Schellenberg, "The Atheist's Free Will Offense", 7, 10-12.