

## Must God Create the Best Available Creatures?

Boone, Mark J.

*Published in:*  
Philosophia Christi

*DOI:*  
[10.5840/pc202123224](https://doi.org/10.5840/pc202123224)

Published: 01/07/2021

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Boone, M. J. (2021). Must God Create the Best Available Creatures? *Philosophia Christi*, 23(2), 271-289.  
<https://doi.org/10.5840/pc202123224>

### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

This version of the paper does not have the same pagination as the published version. Permission has been granted from the Editor of *Philosophia Christi* to upload this contribution according to Philosophy Documentation Center terms of use. Learn more about the Journal by going to [www.epsociety.org/philchristi](http://www.epsociety.org/philchristi).

### Must God Create the Best Available Creatures?<sup>1</sup>

J. L. Mackie distinguished himself in twentieth-century philosophy by presenting an important objection to the traditional free will explanation for why God could allow evil: If evil is due to the free choice of creatures, why wouldn't an omnipotent God simply create free creatures who would choose better? Mackie's objection occasioned some crucial development in the discussion of the problem of evil, for, in turn, Alvin Plantinga distinguished himself with his critique of Mackie. Plantinga's main point is that Mackie made a mistake in assuming that it is within the power of omnipotence fully to create just any possible world. However, Mackie made a second questionable assumption which Plantinga does not critique, and which I aim to clarify in this article. Mackie assumes that a God, as construed by classical theistic belief, who *could* create either of two people—one of whom would freely choose right and the other of whom would freely choose wrong—must create the one who would freely choose right.

This assumption apparently motivates Plantinga's own proposal of universal trans-world depravity—the suggestion that all the free creatures God might have created *would* have sinned. I consider Plantinga's suggestion highly improbable; I think it much more likely that there is at least one possible creature who would freely choose not to sin. More importantly, under Mackie's assumption, if there is at least one possible creature who would choose rightly, then

---

<sup>1</sup> The title of this article is inspired by Robert Merrihew Adams, "Must God Create the Best?," *The Philosophical Review* 81.3 (July 1972), 317-332. I am also grateful for several insightful remarks from editors of, and two blind reviewers for, *Philosophia Christi*.

there is no possibility of God ever allowing any *other* free creature to sin, which clashes with Plantinga's libertarian view of free will.

Directly considering Mackie's second assumption allows for a stronger response to the problem of evil which includes much of the Plantingian account. In what follows I will explain these matters in more detail. We must first (in Section I) review the debate between Mackie and Plantinga. Then we must (in Section II) consider the question whether God must create a person who will freely choose right instead of one who will freely choose wrong. I will explain two areas of concern with the assumption that this is the case. *First*, Plantinga's idea that all possible creatures have trans-world depravity is highly improbable, if not simply impossible, although this would seem to be the best option if we allow Mackie's assumption to stand. *Second*, and more importantly, on this assumption there apparently is no possibility that God would allow a creature ever to choose wrongly, and therefore no genuine creaturely freedom, just as long as there is *some* other possible creature who would choose rightly. I will (in Section III) briefly outline an alternative way of thinking and (in Section IV) overview, in hopes of supporting future analysis, what I think are the available options on this question. In addition to the Plantingian approach, we could follow Mackie and, drawing from Harry Frankfurt, observe that God's creatures might have been morally responsible even without the ability to do otherwise. My view, however, is that God creates people in a state of innocence with the ability to do otherwise, in which case we need only posit that a few possible creatures have trans-world depravity.

### I. Mackie Versus Plantinga

In considering this topic we are talking about *the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom* (CCFs)—facts about what some creature *would* do in a particular set of circumstances. Not every

philosopher agrees that there even are such truths, and I think it is a respectable position to reject their existence.<sup>2</sup> It is not, however, *my* position, and I grant CCFs here for the sake of analyzing a discussion involving philosophers like Plantinga who believe in them.

Our topic is a recent chapter in the long discussion of the problem of evil (POE). The POE is sometimes treated as evidence against the existence of God, and sometimes more like a puzzle to be solved. Generically stated, if there is a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good, then why is there evil? Central to the classical theistic response to the POE, from theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, is free will (FW—a term by which, except where noted otherwise, I refer to FW in the sense employed by Plantinga, i.e. in the sense used by the version of libertarianism which states that we have the ability to do otherwise<sup>3</sup>). The general idea is that evil is the result of the misuse of FW by created beings (humans and angels), and that God is not to be blamed for allowing us to have FW—because FW is a necessary means to some good which outweighs evil, because FW is *itself* such a good, or both. Plantinga and Mackie are

---

<sup>2</sup> The interested reader might consider Scott Shiffer, “The Problem of Evil: An Alternative to Plantinga’s Free Will Defense;” in *The Good, the True, the Beautiful: A Multidisciplinary Tribute to Dr. David K. Naugle*, ed. Mark J. Boone, Rose M. Cothren, Kevin C. Neece, and Jaclyn S. Parrish (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 123 or Robert Merrihew Adams, “Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil;” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14.2 (1977), 109-117.

<sup>3</sup> One alternative perspective, still classified as a libertarian view of freedom, is the view of *narrow source incompatibilism*, which states that we are free if we are the original source of our own actions. For example, and if I understand rightly, Walter Schultz, employing the language of *libertarian* freedom, understands FW in terms of a lack of conditions causing our choices. This would allow for God to intervene in our wrong decisions but not in our right ones, thereby allowing us to have FW to do what is right but not what is wrong. See Walter Schultz, “‘No-Risk’ Libertarian Freedom: A Refutation of the Free-Will Defense,” *Philosophia Christi* 10.1 (2008), 183-199.

dealing with the question in its modern form, under some influence from Leibniz, to whom we owe the philosophical method of considering *possible worlds*. Leibniz considered a precursor to Mackie's question. In chapter 30 of *Discourse on Metaphysics*, Leibniz explains that Judas sinned because he was Judas. We must ask why God created Judas instead of another being, for, without God creating him, Judas was only a possibility in the mind of God. To this question Leibniz gives us no answer save that God created Judas for sufficient reasons we will not know during this life; nevertheless, we may be confident that God brings greater good out of evil, and that the world God created is the best of all the possible worlds.

#### A. Mackie's Objection

Now here is the objection from Mackie:

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. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence;" *Mind* 64.254 (April 1955), 209.

If God be truly omnipotent, he can create people who would freely choose the good. If God is wholly good, God would do so. God could have designed better humans who would freely choose only what was right. Obviously, this is not what happened, and therefore such a God does not exist.

Note well that Mackie assumes that God is able singlehandedly to bring about any possible state of affairs—the assumption Plantinga will challenge. Note, also, the presumption that a God “both omnipotent and wholly good” would refuse to create free creatures who *would* choose evil if some possible free creatures would *not*—the assumption I will challenge.

Mackie thinks God’s nature requires this as a matter of self-consistency: God’s omnipotence necessarily entails that he *could* avoid this, and his goodness that he *would* avoid it. Presumably Mackie thinks the mistake of creating a creature who would choose evil if some other possible creature would not is within the scope of God’s *power*, but not within the scope of his *character*. A holy, wholly good God would never create such a flawed being given the option of creating a better one instead. It may be possible relative to God’s *power*, but not relative to his *goodness*.

### B. Plantinga’s Response

Plantinga’s response is rich and subtle and occurs in multiple texts.<sup>5</sup> A brief overview of a few relevant sources should be sufficient for our purposes.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a technical introduction with clarifications of common misunderstandings, see Zachary Manis, “On Transworld Depravity and the Heart of the Free Will Defense,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59.3 (2006), 153-165. For a shorter introduction to Plantinga versus Mackie, a good source is Daniel Howard-Snyder, “The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga;” in *The Blackwell Guide to the Problem of Evil*, 1st ed.; ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 19-25.

Plantinga's "Which Worlds Could God Have Created?" begins by introducing Leibniz' idea that God had a choice between all the different possible worlds, and, being wholly good and omnipotent, selected the best of all of them.<sup>6</sup> Plantinga asks, "is it true that God, if omnipotent, could have created just any world he pleased?" Unlike Leibniz (and Mackie), Plantinga thinks an affirmative answer is neither obvious nor true. Plantinga carefully hones his concepts and terminology to explain this. Omnipotence does *not* include the ability to do the logically impossible.<sup>7</sup> To *create* is not the same as to *actualize*. God *created* the universe, but a possible world is a state of affairs, an abstract object which does not *begin* to exist and so is not *created*, although God does *actualize* states of affairs. An omnipotent God cannot actualize a state of affairs that includes a creature having made some free choice—some decision in which he could have done otherwise—a decision made with FW.<sup>8</sup> Some component of such a state of affairs can only be actualized *by the creatures themselves*. More precisely, for God fully to actualize in its

---

<sup>6</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Which Worlds Could God have Created?," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70.17 (11 October 1973), 539-541.

<sup>7</sup> A point which satisfies many philosophers, including me. It is sometimes construed as a reasonable limit placed on omnipotence, which I think is not quite right. Arguably, there is no such thing as the ability to do the logically impossible. Even if there were, the classical perspective defines omnipotence in terms of unlimited *power*, not necessarily in terms of unlimited *ability*; some abilities are weaknesses, such as the ability to die, sin, or violate one's own character. This renders the supposed ability to do the logically impossible a *weakness* incompatible with omnipotence. Anselm's *Proslogion* (chapter 7) briefly introduces this perspective. Mackie's article shows no familiarity with the classical account and objects to omnipotence with an argument which would *not* apply to it; see Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 210. This, however, is a topic for another time.

<sup>8</sup> Plantinga, "Which Worlds," 541-543.

entirety a possible world is to “strongly actualize” it, but merely to actualize enough of the relevant circumstances that the rest fall into place is to “weakly actualize” it.<sup>9</sup>

This is pretty standard free will defense fare, to which Plantinga has added some precise language and some conceptual tools for analyzing possible worlds. The stage is now set for the right sort of objection and Plantinga’s response. Can an omnipotent God weakly actualize just any possible world? This is where Mackie’s objection fits in: Can God not arrange such states of affairs that his creatures will, of their own FW, actualize enough of the remaining circumstances to bring about a world with FW and without sin?

Not necessarily.<sup>10</sup> Assuming a creature freely chooses one thing in such a way that he might freely have done otherwise, it is not within the scope of omnipotence to actualize those circumstances in which he actually *does* otherwise. God can only actualize the circumstances leading up to the creature’s free choice, but which possible world is actualized *by that choice* is left up to the creature. Leibniz is wrong in thinking “that God, if omnipotent, could have created just any possible world, and if all good, would have created the best world he could.”<sup>11</sup> This principle Plantinga dubs Leibniz’ lapse (LL). Without LL in place, it is easy to show that evil is consistent with a God who is all-good, omnipotent, and omniscient.<sup>12</sup> God cannot create directly and without some cooperation from the creature a world in which that creature freely chooses not to sin—although God can create most of the circumstances that make up one of these possible worlds, the creature himself must freely choose to bring about the remaining circumstances.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 543-544.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 544-548.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 548.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 349-552.



Perhaps this creature, given the opportunity to do just that, would freely choose wrongly—for any such world! The condition of this creature Plantinga labels *transworld depravity* (TWD).<sup>13</sup> Plainly, if this is the case, God cannot create a sinless world containing that particular creature.

But no problem, right? God can create some *other* creature, can't he—one without TWD? Not necessarily. *Perhaps, suggests Plantinga, every other creature God might possibly create also has TWD!* Perhaps in order to create a world with moral good, God must give FW to his creatures; but they all have TWD, and so there is no avoiding evil. And thus the FW defense is rescued in the wake of any objections along the lines of Mackie's.

Thus Plantinga's "Which Worlds." As far as I can discern, the essentials are unchanged in other texts presenting his FW defense. *God, Freedom, and Evil*, unlike "Which Worlds," deals closely and directly with Mackie.<sup>14</sup> Free will involves the ability to do otherwise, God cannot strongly actualize just any possible world, and it is possible that all free creatures God might have created have TWD. Plantinga states in chapter 9 of *The Nature of Necessity* that "The heart of the Free Will Defence is the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this one contains) without creating

---

<sup>13</sup> TWD is not the property of sinning. TWD is a person's property such that *if* he were placed in certain circumstances he *would* sin. Although my brief descriptions should be sufficient for our purposes, Plantinga himself meticulously crafts highly technical definitions of TWD. The interested reader might consult the primary sources listed here as well as Alvin Plantinga, "Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, & Uncooperative Essences," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78.1 (January 2009), 178-182.

<sup>14</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 5-58. A useful introduction to this book is Shiffer, "The Problem of Evil.," 120-134.

one containing moral evil.”<sup>15</sup> Chapter 9 gives the FW defense directly in response to Mackie, although Plantinga mentions others with similar objections and briefly considers other arguments from evil.<sup>16</sup> Freedom means the ability to do otherwise. LL is a mistake. Once we get past LL, we have to admit that God can only create a perfect world involving a morally significant use of freedom on the part of his creatures with some cooperation from *them*. But, if those creatures freely choose to sin, why can God not create a different world—with different creatures altogether, creatures who would *not* sin? Once again, it is possible that every free creature God might have created has TWD. In this case, God cannot strongly actualize any world in which they freely choose only the right. This does not interfere with God’s omnipotence, following merely from the logical limitations on omnipotence required by freedom. God needs some help from us to create a good world containing morally significant and right uses of freedom; “the creation of a world containing moral good is a co-operative venture; it requires the uncoerced concurrence of significantly free creatures.”<sup>17</sup>

## II. Must God Create a Person Who Freely Chooses Right Instead of Someone Who Doesn’t?

Thus Plantinga’s FW defense in his major writings. Plantinga’s development of the methodology of thinking through possible worlds and applying modal logic to ancient questions in philosophy of religion is a good development—the application of new tools for dealing with old questions. The objections to LL are also solid. But I think there is a problem here. Mackie assumes that a good God must create a possible being who would choose rightly, if such is available, and *not* one who would choose wrongly. Plantinga, to my knowledge, never objects to

---

<sup>15</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; reprint 1982), 167.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

this, instead suggesting that perhaps *all* possible created beings would choose wrongly. We must first consider the argument that Plantinga's perspective is at best highly improbable, after which we will consider the more important question whether creaturely freedom is even possible under Mackie's assumption, which paves the way for a better response than the hypothesis of universal TWD.

#### A. It Is Not Likely that All Possible Creatures Have TWD

This dispute concerns what philosophers call the *logical* problem of evil—the argument that the coexistence of God and evil is not even *possible*.<sup>18</sup> In order to refute Mackie, it is enough to show that it *is* possible, which is the point of suggesting that all possible creaturely essences have TWD.

Fair enough. Nevertheless, the idea of universal TWD has a disadvantage if it is *improbable*; its possibility may make a fine refutation of Mackie, but if we are going to accept it as true then it ought not be highly improbable. If it is, we have reason to consider a different way of dealing with the assumption that God must only create an essence who will not freely choose to sin if a better one is available. In my view, the idea that all possible creaturely essences have TWD is, indeed, improbable at best. The problem is simply that there are too many possible people for the proposition that *all* of them would have sinned to be likely.

What about the billions of *actual* human beings who have lived? Would *all* of them have sinned if given the same choice as the original human choosers? This is a subtle question. On the traditional Christian account, they are all descended from the original human sinners, all

---

<sup>18</sup> The argument that it is not *probable* that God exists given the evil we observe in the world is a different sort of argument, in which Plantinga is also interested; see, for example, section 11 of the chapter on the POE in *God, Freedom, and Evil*.

fashioned out of the same impure clay. Perhaps, had one of them been placed in the Garden of Eden without these corrupting influences, she would not have sinned. But, on the other hand, that very clay may be part of her essence. Perhaps *my* essence is such that I could not have existed with any other body; I am necessarily the biological son of Paul and Carol Boone. Perhaps (as in the traducianist position on the origin of souls) I get my *soul* from them as well. And so for all humans, going back to the original sinners; so, perhaps, there is no human essence among the class of *actual* humans who could have not sinned, excepting Christ and the original humans. (I am not endorsing infralapsarian Calvinism, by the way—merely such Bible passages as Romans 2-3; we may have no ability *not* to sin, but this does not mean we lack the ability either to repent and trust Christ or not.)

But surely God could have directly created and placed in the Garden of Eden a being with the same DNA as mine, perhaps fixing whatever in my DNA contributes to my mild asthma and nearsightedness. Perhaps this being would not be *me*, lacking the essential characteristics pertaining to my origin. But he is still a possible person, isn't he? And surely God could create a being with a soul very similar to mine—only without the same origins and any defects from which my soul suffers.

So the many billions of actual humans, though perhaps not in and of themselves strong evidence for possible creaturely essences who might lack TWD, *are* evidence for the marvelous breadth of the creative powers of God. If God created all of us, then God can create a truly remarkable number of remarkably different people. Add to that all the Klingons, Vulcans, Ewoks, Wookies, Ents, Elves, Fauns, and Merpeople we have been able to imagine. And all the Angels the existence of whom traditional Christianity recognizes, as well as the Djinn recognized by Islam. Granted that Elves and Wookies—alas!—are fictional, does it follow that they are not

even *possible*? Are God's abilities to create more limited than our abilities to imagine? I doubt it, although I suppose it's possible. (Creating real people is harder than imagining them!)

But suppose we limit ourselves to possible human beings. Pick out, at random, someone from the category of possible human beings. Is it unlikely that *he* has TWD? Not that I can say. Pick out a specific two—say, Adam and Eve. Is it unlikely that *they* have TWD? Not that I can say. But it is unlikely that among millions, billions, or *trillions* of possible humans God could find not even *one* without it. And the higher the number of possible humans, the less likely this is.

And just how high *is* this number? How many humans *is* God able to create in a state of innocence? I know no reason to think it is very few, although there are many things I do not know. I am inclined to think the number is infinite. Since the probability that *all* of them have TWD decreases as their number increases, it may be downright *impossible* that *all* of them have TWD.<sup>19</sup>

Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne in a well-read piece explain the idea that *some* possible free creature has transworld *sanctity* instead of TWD, the characteristic of only choosing *rightly* instead of wrongly.<sup>20</sup> This, they claim, is a reasonable premise, and better than Plantinga's premise that it is possible that *every* possible free creature has TWD.

---

<sup>19</sup> There may be some complication with non-finite probabilities. If I throw a dart at a dart board, the point in the center of the dart will surely hit *some* point on the dartboard, even though there was an infinite number of other points it might have hit. Perhaps there is some slim possibility accompanying a non-finite probability that *all* of an infinity of possible people have TWD.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44.1 (August 1998), 1-21.

They also insightfully observe that even if an *infinite* number of possible people *do* have TWD, that does not mean *no* possible person does not.<sup>21</sup>

Full credit is due to William Rowe for being the friendliest atheist philosopher around, to the point of defending Plantinga on this point!<sup>22</sup> Still, I find his response unconvincing; from what I can gather, he acknowledges that the probability that everyone has TWD is increasingly low the more possible people there are, and points out that as long as the number is finite there is still a chance they all do.<sup>23</sup> Quite so. Rowe also apparently acknowledges that if there is an infinite number of options we have no chance of *all* of them turning out the same way. I tend to agree.<sup>24</sup>

Plantinga also responds to Howard-Snyder and O’Leary-Hawthorne, asking, “Doesn’t it seem *possible* that the counterfactuals of freedom should fall out in such a way that” every

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> William L. Rowe, “In Defense of ‘The Free Will Defense’: Response to Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O’Leary-Hawthorne,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44.2 (October 1998), 115-120. (Rowe’s description of “friendly atheism” is in his more famous article, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.”)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps I have misunderstood Rowe, but it looks to me like he may have made a mistake in comparing a random selection between two options within time to God’s (presumably timeless) pre-creation selection of possible creatures. His illustration is the selection of one ball out of two from an urn, restoring the ball after each selection. He is correct that, at any point in an infinitely continuing series of selections, it is possible that we will always have selected the same ball; but this is because at each point we are dealing with a *finite* number of drawings. If an omniscient God has an infinite number of possible creatures to choose from, it seems that Rowe’s analysis weighs *against* the possibility of Plantinga’s hypothesis.

creaturely essence would go wrong at some point along the way to the actualization of a perfect world which includes it?<sup>25</sup> That seems very likely, he says. But if it is not even *possible*, then it is a necessary truth that some creaturely essences do *not* have TWD—which is not likely at all! Again, “Doesn’t it seem possible that the counterfactuals of freedom fall out in such a way that for every perfect world” there is at least one creature in it who would freely go wrong at least once?<sup>26</sup> Again, he says, that seems very likely. But if this should not even be possible, then it is a *necessary* truth that some possible people do not have this problem, “which doesn’t seem true at all.” Plantinga is baffled as to what proposition might be at least as likely as the possibility that every person has this problem, but which would also preclude that possibility. Perhaps the proposition in question is simply, “There is an infinite number of possible free creatures God could have created in a state of innocence.” The larger the number of possible creaturely essences, the less likely it is that they *all* have TWD, and it seems to me that this probability must be at or near 0% if we are dealing with an actually infinite number of such essences.

Still, the main point is that the proposition in question is, at best, highly improbable. A brief look at some more literature would be in order, starting with Howard-Snyder’s more recent response to Plantinga.<sup>27</sup> He explains that there are different ways of thinking through CCFs. The second way supports *Plantinga’s* perspective, the first way *his*; unfortunately, “none of us is in a position” to know which way (if either) is correct.<sup>28</sup> On the first way, it is possible that *all* possible people, even if there is an infinite number of them, have the same property—in this

---

<sup>25</sup> Plantinga, “Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, & Uncooperative Essences,” 188.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>27</sup> Howard-Snyder, “The Logical Problem of Evil,” 27-32.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

case, TWD. I suspect that Howard-Snyder's articulation of this is not quite consistent with Plantingian metaphysics for a reason which I shall relegate to the footnote at the end of this sentence, and accordingly I maintain my doubts that an infinite number of possible creatures is consistent with all of them having TWD on *either* way of thinking about CCFs.<sup>29</sup> In any case, Howard-Snyder explains that, on the second way and no matter *how many* people may have the same property, it is always possible that *someone* else does not. Therefore, even if an infinite number of possible persons have TWD, there is always *some* number of possible persons without it.

A number of prominent philosophers have taken the view that it is at best unlikely that every possible free creature has TWD including Robert Adams, Alexander Pruss, Joshua Rasmussen, and Dean Zimmerman; the interested reader will find a survey of their work in Scott Hill's "What Are the Odds that Everyone Is Depraved?"<sup>30</sup> Hill disagrees, explaining the principle

---

<sup>29</sup> Howard-Snyder explains that on this model of thinking through CCFs, there is some possible world in which all people would have TWD, some world in which none do, and various worlds in which some but not all do. This may fit the views of some metaphysicians, but not Plantinga. As I understand *The Nature of Necessity*, if a person's essence has TWD in one possible world, it has it in *all* of them. There are, to be sure, possible worlds in which no one has *sin*, but none in which no one's *essence* has *TWD*. TWD is not a creature's property of being deprived in every possible world in which he exists, but his property of sinning (freely) in every world God weakly actualizes on the way to a world in which that same creature does not sin. It is, in Plantingian terms, a world-indexed property, and accordingly part of a creature's essence. (This is not the same thing as saying that creature sins by necessity; a person still has TWD by his own choice; it's just that a person's essence in *The Nature of Necessity* includes all his possibilities, including the counterfactuals pertaining to the exercise of his own freedom.)

<sup>30</sup> Scott Hill, "What Are the Odds that Everyone Is Depraved?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 57.3 (July 2020), 301.



of Indifference: “Whenever there is no evidence favoring one possibility over another, they have the same probability.”<sup>31</sup> Hill objects to this principle, concluding, “Do not use Indifference to assign probabilities in ignorance, especially when the number of possibilities is infinite.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, says Hill, the objection that it is improbable that everyone has TWD is useless without the principle of Indifference.<sup>33</sup> Since we should reject Indifference, we should reject this objection. Now I am quite comfortable rejecting Indifference; Hill is correct that we have no way of knowing what sort of “distribution of truth-values to the counterfactuals of freedom God would end up working with prior to creation.”<sup>34</sup> However, I do not agree that—or do not understand why—the idea that it is improbable that everyone has TWD must rely on Indifference. For all I know (and taking a cue from Howard-Snyder and O’Leary-Hawthorne), it might be highly probable that many or even an infinity of possible free creatures have TWD, but that does not mean there is no one without it. I do know that, in Plantinga’s FW defense, these possible creatures have the ability to not sin and that this is therefore, however improbable, possible. If (as I suppose) there is an infinite number of possible creatures, it seems likely that at least one of them would take up that option.

To try taking Hill’s side for a moment, it may be that a free creature’s choice not to sin might be quite the uphill battle—the moral equivalent of running a mile in three minutes. Now I suppose that it is possible for a human to run a mile in so short a time, but it may be reasonable to suppose that even an infinite number of humans will never do so. Similarly, perhaps it is

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 301-306.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

possible for a free creature not to sin, but so extremely improbable that it may be reasonable to suppose that none ever do so. We could even speculate that any particular act of sin is avoidable, but that it is an impossibility for any creature, or any creature such as we, to avoid sin in *every* free choice we must make on the way to a completed sinless world. Perhaps creatures such as we can't really avoid sin. This is an old way of thinking, suggested by, for example, Chapter 30 of Leibniz' *Discourse on Metaphysics*. But I think we actually have some evidence *against* this. Our postlapsarian state may be such as this, or worse, but surely God is kinder than to allow an Adam in an Edenic state to have such a difficulty to surmount; some original free creature might have to struggle not to sin, but would probably find himself quite equal to the task—or would find God's gracious help in resisting both there for the asking and easy enough to ask for.

It is, thus, my working opinion that it is improbable, perhaps impossible, that every possible creaturely essence has TWD. This is Plantinga's suggestion in light of the assumption that God, given the choice between two possible free creatures one of whom has TWD and one of whom does not, must actualize only the one who does not. If there is a better way for a theist to respond to the POE without challenging this assumption, I do not know what it is.

I do, however, have a suggestion: We could just drop that assumption. Let's consider one reason that might be necessary.

#### B. Is Freedom Even Possible Under This Assumption?

While a number of scholars have addressed the probability that every creaturely essence has TWD, this more important issue has, from what I can tell, been rarely if ever directly considered.

"A Simpler Free Will Defence" by Bernstein and Helms comes close, pointing out, *contra* Mackie, that FW *plus* the existence of God *plus* the possibility of free creatures who do

not sin entails the possibility that God and evil coexist.<sup>35</sup> For if God should actualize a free creature who does not sin and who could have done otherwise, then there is some possible world in which God actualized her and she *did* do otherwise.

And the points I wish to make are that Mackie's view of God would likely render such a world impossible and that it would make the possibility of such a world a function of what a myriad of other creatures would have done; for, if anyone *else* would have not sinned, God necessarily opts not to create someone who would.

Let's look at this problem more closely. Mackie assumes that an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God will not actualize a worse person when he can actualize a better. Why, if free non-sinners are possible people, did God not simply create them instead of us? I suggest the answer is this: If God, when given a choice to actualize either a person who will not go wrong or one who will, must actualize only the one who will *not*, then the one who *would* has no possibility of ever going wrong and, thus, is not really free. From this it also follows that the person who would *not* go wrong is not free either, just as long as there is some *other* possible person who would not.

And these are ridiculous results. Let's run through the problem with the help of an example. Suppose God is going to create a good world with such-and-such characteristics, including FW for the rational beings who inhabit it. Looking at his collection of possible beings, he finds two who satisfy his requirements for this world: Adam the Human and Finarfin the Elf.

---

<sup>35</sup> C'Zar Bernstein and Nathaniel Helms, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77.3 (June 2015), 197-203.

God notices that Adam will sin if created in a state of innocence with FW, but Finarfin will not.<sup>36</sup>

Accordingly, God selects Finarfin, rejects Adam, and makes his world!

The question now arises: Was there ever any real possibility—given Mackie’s assumption that God must not actualize a person who would sin when he could actualize one who would not—that *Adam* would sin? Apparently not: Every world in which Adam sins is closed off by a God whose goodness precludes his allowing that world to be actualized.

Another question arises: Is Finarfin free? More precisely, is he free according to Plantinga’s standards? Could he have done otherwise? Unlikely. For suppose that there is at least one other possible creature who would not choose to sin. Now consider the nearby possible world in which Finarfin chooses to sin. God—on Mackie’s assumption—would *not* actualize that world. If it were the case that Finarfin would sin, then God would instead create the world with that *third* free creature—Treebeard the Ent, perhaps. So there was never any possibility that Finarfin would sin, just as, in the choice between the worlds containing Adam and Finarfin, there was never any chance of the one containing a sinful Adam being actualized. And, since in this scenario there is no possibility of these sad states of affairs being actualized, neither Adam nor Finarfin is actually free.

In short, under the assumption that God must not actualize a free creature who will sin if he can instead actualize one who will not, then—assuming at least one such possible free creature is available—there is no possibility of anyone else sinning.

Let’s run over this again from two other angles, presuming Mackie’s view as we go.

---

<sup>36</sup> Finarfin in Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* is an Elf who does not follow the rebellion against the Valar that brought the Noldor back to Middle-Earth. Technically, he *began* to, which I would count as a sin. But close enough—Finarfin’s role in the rest of the tale is that of an unfallen, sinless Elf.

Assume that *some* creature in *some* world would not sin. Then no *other* possible creature actually has the ability to sin, and so no other possible creature has morally significant FW, for God out of his goodness forecloses the possibility of any world leading to such a creature sinning. In short, it seems that Mackie's assumption entails that—given that *some* creature would not have sinned—any other possible free person would not *really* be free.

Now suppose that *two* possible creatures would choose not to sin. And suppose that God actualizes one of them. Is that creature free? Not under Mackie's assumption, for God created him only because he would not sin; God prevented the actualization of any world containing his sin, rendering his sinning impossible. In short, it seems that Mackie's views entail that—given that some *other* creature would not have sinned—an actual free person is not really free.

Put differently, does God open up the possibility of a world where Adam sins because all the other possible creatures would have sinned—and does God close it instead just because some possible person would not have? Whether Adam has freedom should not be a function of the choices of various other, merely possible creatures. It should merely be a function of the answer to this question: In a state of affairs in which God has created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, does he have the ability either to obey God or not to obey God? Under Mackie's assumption, and assuming some *other* possible creature would not sin, Adam in this state of affairs *lacks* that ability.

Perhaps, one might object, we do not need all this talk of possible creatures. Perhaps it is in the very nature of certain created beings that they are able to sin; for a loving God would create beings able to love him and each other, and love cannot be coerced, and therefore entails the ability to sin. I quite agree. My point is less to avoid this objection than to clear the way to go *back* to it, or to positions like it. More precisely, my point is that Mackie's objection does not

overcome this sort of view because his assumption would remove those creatures' ability to sin for nearly every conceivable arrangements of CCFs.

But perhaps an alternative Plantingian perspective will help to clarify things. Consider this argument that allows us to maintain the assumption that God must create only a person who would not sin if such a person is available: Either at least one possible person lacks TWD, or not. If not, then God creates someone with TWD and the ability to do otherwise (which, is of course, what happened). But if at least one possible person *does* lack TWD, then God creates that person, who still has the ability to do otherwise. And, either way, the ability to do otherwise is preserved.

I think this argument is not *exactly* correct; under the assumption in question, it ought to be either *just one person* or else *no people* at all who lack TWD. (If some possible person *will* do right, then God will not allow for the possibility of any world to be actualized in which some *other* person will do wrong.) But close enough, and fair enough: On this Plantingian view, freedom is preserved. The essential point is about Mackie, not Plantinga: Under Mackie's assumption, given that some possible creature would *not* sin, no other possible creature has any ability to sin. The choice Mackie says God would make would eliminate freedom because it would never allow any possible person to sin—assuming there is some *other* possible person without TWD. This leads to absurd consequences, as shown above—assuming that some possible creature in some world *would* not sin, all worlds in which other possible creatures *do* sin are worlds God will not allow to be actualized, and so these people have no possibility of ever going wrong, and so do not have morally significant FW.

Thus, when Burgess-Jackson, in the tradition of Mackie, asks about “humans who have free will and cannot do evil,” we can answer his question: “If free will is interpreted as requiring

only the *possibility* of choice, then God *can* create such humans, and again, we should want to know why God hasn't done so."<sup>37</sup> Free will *does* require the possibility of choice, and these people are perfectly possible; but there is no possibility of free choice for a human if all worlds in which he does wrong are worlds God refuses to actualize on the grounds that some *other* possible person would, if created, choose better.

Before we move on, a brief word on what sort of freedom we are talking about. I have been focusing on the freedom to do wrong or not, or to do right or not. Of course, there are important related issues about such things as non-libertarian freedom, (libertarian) freedom between multiple ways of doing right, and the divine state of being *unable* to do wrong. I am focusing on the freedom to either do or not do wrong or right. I think this is an important variety of creaturely freedom, for this is *moral* freedom in the strict sense—the freedom to choose between one moral status and another. Moreover, it is *this* kind of freedom which Mackie, Plantinga, et al are talking about, and we need to understand just what it entails—in particular, that God not overrule it in the case of one creature solely because some other possible creature would do better.

### III. The Free Will Defense without Mackie's Assumption

Hence my counsel, which is certainly *not* to reject Plantinga's FW defense wholesale so much as to reject Mackie more thoroughly. However, once we reject Mackie's assumption that God must not create a person who would sin if he had better possible creatures available, we also have no need for the universal TWD hypothesis.

---

<sup>37</sup> Keith Burgess-Jackson, "Free Will, Omnipotence, and the Problem of Evil;" *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 9.3 (1988), 184-185.

So let us picture Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, dwelling in a state of innocence and freedom—both the ability to sin, and the ability not to. If this be their situation, it follows that *both* a world in which they do not sin *and* one in which they *do* sin are possible. But if a world in which they sin is truly possible, then God will allow it to come about. In order to account for God’s willingness to let this evil take place, we need merely observe that it follows from Adam and Eve, specifically, being free that there is some real chance of *their* going wrong (as Bernstein and Helms say), and that this is so *regardless of what other possible creatures would do*.

I do *not* propose that we dispense with the notion of TWD. Rather, we just need to be clear on *who* has it—namely, just as many as are necessary to explain the evil we see in this world. How many is that? I do not know, but it may be very few (perhaps only Adam, Eve, and some angels).

The parameters of the FW defense, then, may be kept relatively simple. First, we may say that God chooses which person or persons to create in a state of innocence for reasons relating to his overall purpose in creation—presumably including their having FW and their being the image of God, and perhaps also including their being humans specifically. Next, suppose that this leaves God with some choices. Suppose, that is, that there really is a large or even an infinite number of possible creatures available. Now why would God choose to create the sinful-to-be humans and angels he did in fact create? Maybe, as Adams suggests, because God has no obligation to anyone to create the best of all possible worlds and, instead, exercised grace towards us by creating us.<sup>38</sup> Maybe because some account of the *felix culpa*—the idea that our

---

<sup>38</sup> Adams, “Must God Create the Best?”



sin leads to a better world overall through the mercies of God as displayed in the Gospel—is correct.<sup>39</sup> Maybe we learn moral responsibility by suffering the consequences of sin. Maybe there is some other reason, or some combination of reasons.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, consideration of the POE has many angles, and many things are relevant to how good this particular world is, and a complete answer to the POE would draw on more theological resources than just the FW defense all by itself.

One piece of the puzzle, however, is simply this: Whatever choice God may still have among possible creatures who meet his requirements for the good creation he is planning, God honors the FW of a person he creates by *not* refusing to actualize that person based solely on there being some other possible creature who would have done better.

#### IV. What Are Our Options?

I have argued that Mackie’s assumption clashes with FW, but that is not necessarily the end of the story. The major motive, of course, of the FW defense has been that the ability to do otherwise helps to ensure that God’s creatures are morally responsible for what they make of themselves and the world. But could we be morally responsible *without* the ability to do otherwise? A look at this question will help to clarify what options are available when considering the POE. I suggest these considerations as a promising area for future analysis.

---

<sup>39</sup> Plantinga considers this idea in Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or ‘O felix culpa’;” in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*; ed. Peter Van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 1-25.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Burch suggests three reasons a world with sinners (and some sinless angels) can be understood as very good; see Burch, “The Defense from Plenitude Against the Problem of Evil,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12.1 (1981), 29-37.

In a nutshell, a *Frankfurt case* is a situation in which a person lacks the ability to do other than she does and yet is morally responsible for her actions.<sup>41</sup> Suppose that I have been recruited by a criminal organization to help them with a big robbery, and the night before the job they surgically insert a head-up display inside my eye through which they give instructions for getting past security (like in Season One of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*). Little do I know that, during the procedure, they also gave me a revolutionary new mind-control drug that prevents me, for one day, from even trying to resist their orders.

Am I still responsible for my bad actions as I cheerfully go through with the evil deed with no ability to do otherwise, no ability to resist, and no interest in resisting? Yes.

Or suppose that I am really working undercover for the FBI; they knew about the drug as well as the device, which they have managed to hack; I go through with the robbery, collect evidence for the government, and turn in my criminal cohorts, leading to the arrest of the whole gang; had I attempted to do otherwise, the FBI would have forced my hand.

Am I still responsible for my good actions as I cheerfully fight crime with no ability to do otherwise, no ability to resist law-enforcement, and no interest in resisting? Yes.

Now let us modify the example for theological purposes. Suppose that, in some possible world, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden choose not to disobey God. Had they done otherwise, however, God would have created someone else instead, denying them the opportunity even to intend to disobey.

---

<sup>41</sup> See Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66.23 (1969), 829-839.

Are they still responsible for their good choice? So it would seem. Responsibility does not necessarily require the ability to do, or even to intend, otherwise. We may at least grant this much to Mackie: His assumption may remove FW, but does not for that reason necessarily remove moral responsibility.

But would they be *free*? They may be free on some view of freedom as not requiring the ability to do otherwise.<sup>42</sup> In this case, we still need some additional explanation for why God created the soon-to-be-sinful men and angels he did in fact create—perhaps the thesis of universal TWD, perhaps a *felix culpa* theory, and so on. However, if we join Plantinga in presuming that FW requires the ability to do otherwise, then they are *not* free, and we need say very little in response to Mackie—only that God gives some of his creatures FW, that freedom *does* include the ability to do otherwise, and that some number of people God created have TWD.

Plantinga's approach, without rejecting the assumption in question, is to recognize FW as the ability to do otherwise and preserve FW by means of the hypothesis of universal TWD. My contention is that there is another way to preserve FW as the ability to do otherwise—reject the assumption that God must not create a person with TWD if one without it is available.

We may now draw things to a close, beginning with this observation: It is a possible position that there are some possible circumstances in which a creature chooses well, is morally responsible for so choosing, and yet is not free since, had it been the case that she *would* have chosen otherwise, God would never have allowed her the chance.

---

<sup>42</sup> Including compatibilism as well as narrow source incompatibilism.

Accordingly, these, it seems, are the major options available to the theist in responding to the POE:

First, we could reject the whole idea of investigating things in this way. Perhaps there are no truths about merely possible free decisions by merely possible creatures, and perhaps if there are it is beyond our ability to think usefully about them.<sup>43</sup>

Second, perhaps we can find some problem with my analysis here, some reason to think that Adam and Eve choosing rightly in the Garden of Eden—even as some other possible creatures would also choose rightly and even as Mackie’s assumption reigns—is *not* a convincing Frankfurt case.

Third, we can accept Mackie’s assumption that God must not actualize a possible person who would sin if he had available one who would not and stipulate that the ability to do otherwise is *not* especially important although moral responsibility *is*.<sup>44</sup> We may then go on to explain the evil observed in the actual world to the best of our abilities—perhaps by saying that everyone has TWD, or perhaps in some other way.

---

<sup>43</sup> See Shiffer, “The Problem of Evil,” 123 or Robert Merrihew Adams, “Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil.” Howard-Snyder has a different perspective; he thinks we *can* think usefully about them but argues that there are different plausible models for thinking about them, that it is difficult to know which model is best, and that the different models affect which perspective on these matters is correct; Howard-Snyder, “The Logical Problem of Evil,” 25-27

<sup>44</sup> This, if I understand rightly, is the position of Schulz, in which God could allow morally responsible creatures to use FW, understood in terms of a lack of determining conditions, to do right even while preventing them from doing wrong; Walter Schultz, “‘No-Risk’ Libertarian Freedom.”

Fourth, we can accept Mackie's assumption that God must not actualize a possible person who would sin if he had available one who would not; stipulate that the ability to do otherwise *is* important; and go on to explain the evil observed in the actual world to the best of our abilities. I do not know what better explanation than Plantinga's hypothesis of universal TWD might be available.

Fifth, we can reject Mackie's assumption that God must not actualize a possible person who would sin if he had available one who would not. Now we *could*, further, opt to deny that God gave his creatures the ability to do otherwise, which seems to fit the position of supralapsarian Calvinism. Or, alternatively, we may recognize the importance of the ability to do otherwise as well as the importance of moral responsibility. We may then go on to explain the evil observed in the actual world to the best of our abilities, for which a hypothesis of TWD with a more limited scope should suffice.

My own working opinion is that God does not *merely* endow some of his creatures with moral responsibility. God also gave them the ability to do otherwise. And, unfortunately, some number of them had TWD—a number large enough to explain the evil we observe in the actual world. Of course, this means that we have to consider the value of FW without reference solely to its usefulness as a means of securing moral responsibility. *Why* would God give us FW—why, that is, in addition to its usefulness in securing moral responsibility? Are there reasons that could outweigh all the evil observed in the actual world? Some familiar answers might help to explain this, such as a *felix culpa* account or Adams' suggestion that God gives us grace in creating sinners. And perhaps God, who put us in a position in which we *appeared* to have the ability to do otherwise, would not have deceived us so. Without rejecting such reasons, I confess that I am inclined to think that FW, being a faculty of some of the highest created beings, is valuable in

itself and not merely as a means to the end of securing moral responsibility. Must the sole reason for the FW defense be to recognize the value of FW on the grounds that it guarantees moral responsibility?

Our major options are not necessarily all mutually exclusive, and one idea in particular might be worth a close look in the future. Perhaps there are, after all, not that many possible human creatures God could create in a state of innocence in such a way as to fulfill his purposes in creation. Perhaps Adam and Eve are the prototypical humans and the only possible pair for the job. If so, variations of our fourth and fifth options could perhaps come together. Perhaps only two human beings need to have TWD in order to explain things, and perhaps every possible human—all two out of two of them—whom God might have created and blessed with the original free human choice actually has TWD. And, of course, their choosing rightly in some merely possible world would not then be a Frankfurt case.

In short, Mackie's assumption that God must create a creature who would not sin rather than one who would remove FW for nearly every possible arrangement of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. This should be recognized and, although these matters merit further consideration, I reject his assumption. God does not compromise his creatures' ability to do otherwise by creating only those who never go wrong. Some possible person or persons have TWD. *Some* do—and that is enough.