DISCUSSION

TOOLEY AND EVIL: A REPLY

Alvin Plantinga

Michael Tooley's piece, 'Alvin Plantinga and the Argument from Evil'[1] makes one thing perfectly clear: Tooley thinks my discussion of the argument from evil in *The Nature of Necessity*[2] is less than a rousing success. ('Plantinga's discussion of the argument from evil is, in short, extraordinarily weak, both logically and philosophically'. (p. 376)) Tooley's piece bristles with accusations of fallacy, misrepresentation and illusion fostering. As far as I can see, however, none of his charges has any merit.

I *Rigorlessness*

After claiming that most of what I say about the theological argument from evil 'does not bear upon the most basic formulation of the argument', Tooley goes on as follows:

> Still, I think it may be very worthwhile to examine at least briefly Plantinga's discussion of the thesis that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God, since the detailed nature of the discussion may deceive readers who are not familiar with the issues into thinking that Plantinga's discussion is a reasonably rigorous one. This illusion deserves to be dispelled. (p. 361)

Now in attempting to dispell this 'illusion' Tooley tries to make four points. First, he complains that what I say is vague; second, that I portray trivial questions as deep; third, that I am 'strikingly casual' about subjunctive conditionals; and finally, that my central argument is 'simply fallacious'.

Since the charge of simple fallacy is perhaps the most serious, suppose we begin with it. According to the 'incompatibility thesis', the proposition

(1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good

is incompatible, in the broadly logical sense, either with

(2) There is evil

or with some proposition detailing the amount or varieties of evil the world contains — some version, perhaps, of

(3) There are 10^{13} turps of evil.

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[1] *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Dec. 1980, pp. 360-376.
[2] Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974, pp. 164-195. (Hereafter 'N N'.)

I argued that this claim is false. Central to the main line of argument was a subsidiary argument for the conclusion that even if God is omnipotent, there are many possible worlds he could not have actualised, either weakly or strongly. According to Tooley, however, this argument needs more work: 'Plantinga's discussion of the incompatibility thesis is, in short, extremely unsatisfactory in a number of respects, and the central argument upon which everything rests, is simply fallacious'. (p. 366) This is a repetition of what he says earlier on the same page: 'Platinga's argument here is simply fallacious'. The same charge is to be found in Tooley's bilious review of *The Nature of Necessity*: 'His attempt to prove that it was not within God's power to actualise just any possible world that includes his existence is simply fallacious.'[3]

Now these are strong words; how does Tooley back them up? With a mere confusion. My argument went as follows. First, I distinguished what God could have *strongly* actualised from what he could have *weakly* actualised: God could have strongly actualised a state of affairs S if and only if he could have caused S to be actual; and God could have *weakly* actualised S if and only if there is a state of affairs S^* such that (a) God could have strongly actualised S^*, and (b) if he *had* strongly actualised S^*, then S would have been actual. My aim was to show that there are possible worlds God could not have actualised, either weakly or strongly.

I argued as follows. Let's suppose that Curley Smith, the mayor of Boston, has in fact been offered a bribe of $35,000 to take some improper action; and let's suppose further that he has accepted the bribe. We may speculate as to what Curley would have done had he instead been offered a bribe of $20,000 to perform that same improper action. Clearly there are possible worlds in which (a) God strongly actualises (among others) the state of affairs consisting in Curley's being offered a bribe of $20,000 and Curley's being free with respect to the action of taking the bribe, and in which (b) Curley freely accepts the bribe. Now let W be any such world, and let T be the largest state of affairs God strongly actualises in W; that is, God strongly actualises T in W and T includes every state of affairs God strongly actualises in W. I argued (p. 181) that there are other possible worlds in which God strongly actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W, and in which Curley *rejects* the bribe; let W^* be any such world. In W^* God strongly actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W; hence T, the largest state of affairs God strongly actualises in W, is also the largest state of affairs he strongly actualises in W^*. W^*, therefore, includes God's strongly actualising T. I then assumed that either

(4) If God had strongly actualised Curley's being offered the bribe and being free to accept or reject it, then Curley would have accepted it

or

(5) If God had strongly actualised Curley's being offered the bribe and being free to accept or reject it, then Curley would not have accepted it

is true. I went on to argue that if (4) is true, then so is

[3] *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, May 1977, p. 102.

(6) If God has strongly actualised T, then Curley would have accepted the bribe;

and if (5) is true, then so is

(7) If God had strongly actualised T then Curley would not have accepted the bribe.

I then argued for two theses:

(8) If (6) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised W^* (that is, if (6) is true, then there is no state of affairs C such that God could have strongly actualised C and such that if he had strongly actualised C, then W^* would have been actual), and

(9) If (7) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised W.

(The argument for (8) and (9) is to be found on pp. 181-182). Accordingly, if (6) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised W^*; if (7) is true, he could not have weakly actualised W; so either way there is at least one possible world God could not have weakly actualised. Furthermore, since strong actualisation is a special case of weak actualisation, it follows that there are possible worlds God could not have actualised, either weakly or strongly.

Now Tooley objects as follows:

Plantinga's argument here is simply fallacious. For suppose that it is true that if God had strongly actualised T, then Curley would have accepted the bribe. How does it follow that God could not actualise W^*? The answer is that it does not follow, since none of the premises rule out the possibility that while God can strongly actualise T, he can also weakly actualise T without strongly actualising it. And it may be the case that if God were to (merely) weakly actualise T, then Curley would reject the bribe. So the premises do not preclude the possibility that God can bring about W by strongly actualising T, and W^* by weakly actualising, but not strongly actualising, T. (p. 367)

It isn't easy to take this objection seriously. Tooley claims that perhaps God could have weakly actualised W^* by *weakly* actualising T but not *strongly* actualising it. But what I argued was that there are possible worlds in which God actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W, and in which Curley does not take the bribe; and I proposed to let 'W^*' denote any such world. By hypothesis, then, W^* is one of the possible worlds in which God strongly actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W. T (by hypothesis) is the largest state of affairs God strongly actualises in W; it is therefore one of the states of affairs he *does* strongly actualise in W, and hence is one of the states of affairs he strongly actualises in W^*. By hypothesis, therefore, W^* includes God's strongly actualising T. But then to suggest that God could perhaps weakly actualise W by weakly but *not* strongly actualising T is to fall into egregious confusion; any world in which God does *not* strongly actualise T is not W^*. One way for God to *ensure* that W^* is *not* actual is to refrain from strongly actualising T.

Let me restate the main point here. I argued (p. 181) that God's strongly actualising T (the largest state of affairs he strongly actualises in W) doesn't include or entail Curley's taking the bribe; I then went on as follows:

> So there is another possible world W^* where God actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W, and in which Curley rejects the bribe. W^* therefore includes GT [God's strongly actualising T] and $\bar{A}$ [Curley's not accepting the bribe]. That is, in W^* God strongly actualises T but no state of affairs properly including T; and in W^* $\bar{A}$ holds. And now it is easy to see that God could not have actualized this world W^*. (p. 181)

By hypothesis, then, W^* is one of the worlds that includes God's strongly actualising T; any world in which God does not strongly actualise T is not W^*. So how can Tooley be serious in claiming that 'the premisses do not preclude the possibility that God can bring about . . . W^* by weakly actualising, but not strongly actualising, T'?

In the next paragraph, Tooley perpetrates another version of the same misunderstanding:

> Plantinga goes on to offer a less informal and more explicit statement of his argument here. But it suffers from precisely the same flaw, since it involves an inference which rests upon the assumption that 'W^* includes GT' (p. 812) — where 'GT' means the same as 'God strongly actualises T.' The possibility that God might actualise W^* by weakly actualising T is once again overlooked.

But of course that W^* includes GT is not an *assumption*. I argued that there are possible worlds that include GT and in which Curley rejects the bribe; I proposed to let the variable 'W^*' denote any such world. It is therefore a piece of sheer confusion to criticise this argument for 'resting on the assumption' that W^* includes GT. Suppose you show that there is at least one prime number p^* greater than 10^9. You begin a subsequent argument by saying 'Now since p^* is prime, it is not divisible by 17' and go on to infer some conclusion. Would you be impressed if someone claimed that your argument is simply fallacious, because it rests upon the assumption that p^* is prime?

So much for Tooley's claim that my main argument is 'simply fallacious'. He makes another charge of lack of rigour as follows:

> Thirdly, subjunctive conditions enter into Plantinga's argument in a crucial way, since he needs to talk about what people would have done if certain things had been the case. He is strikingly casual, both in his use of such conditionals, and in the assumptions he makes about them. (p. 364)

My 'striking casualness', says Tooley, comes out in my assuming without argument that either

(7) If Curley had been offered a bribe of $20,000 he would have accepted the bribe

or

> (8) If Curley had been offered a bribe of $20,000 he would not have accepted the bribe[4]

is true. Furthermore, he says, this assumption is 'implausible'. Now I don't think this assumption is at all implausible. But the important point here — a point that seems to have eluded Tooley's attention — is that the free will defense, as I stated it, is in no way dependent upon the assumption that either (7) or (8) is true. I gave *two* versions of the crucial argument — the argument for the conclusion that there are possible worlds God could not have weakly actualised; *one* of these arguments took as a premiss the disjunction of (7) and (8) and the other did *not*. Before giving the first argument, I said

> Accordingly, I shall temporarily take it for granted, in what follows, that either (7) or (8) is true; as we shall see, . . . this assumption, harmless as it no doubt is, can be dispensed with. (p. 180)

After giving the argument I said once more that this assumption is dispensible and then gave for the same conclusion another argument that dispensed with it. Where is the lack of rigour there?

Indeed, so far as rigorlessness goes in this context, the shoe is on the other foot. According to Tooley,

> Another reason why it is very difficult to see why one should think the answer to the question whether the disjunction of (7) and (8) is true is affirmative, let alone obvious, is that neither a consequence analysis of subjunctive conditionals nor a possible worlds analysis of the Lewis variety entails that either (7) is true or (8) is true. A Stalnaker account does have this consequence, but it does so because it collapses 'would' conditionals and 'might' conditionals and is implausible for precisely that reason. (p. 364)

What Tooley seems to mean here is that the formula

(10) $A \rightarrow B \vee A \rightarrow \bar{B}$,

which is the form of the disjunction of (7) with (8), is valid on Stalnaker's semantics for subjunctive conditionals but not on Lewis'. Now suppose we assume for purposes of argument that Lewis' semantics is in fact adequate. How does the fact that (10) is not valid on it constitute a reason for thinking that the disjunction of (7) with (8) is not true? Perhaps some propositions of the form of (10) are false while others of that form are true or even necessarily true; and perhaps counterfactuals of the sort under consideration fall into the latter class. None of the logics proposed for possibility and necessity yield *necessarily* $7 + 5 = 12$ as a consequence (either syntactically or semantically); is that a reason for supposing that proposition false?

In his concluding summary Tooley makes a vastly stronger claim:

> Thus, for example, he [Plantinga] advances a claim about subjunctive conditionals, for which he offers no support at all, despite the fact that the

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[4] The numbering here is from NN p. 174.

claim is both intuitively implausible, and demonstrably false relative to the two most plausible accounts of the truth conditions of such statements. (p. 376)

I'd like to see the demonstration. Lewis' system doesn't yield the disjunction of (7) with (8) as a consequence; but of course neither does it yield its denial, or the denial of *any* instance of (10). Why does Tooley here claim that the disjunction of (7) with (8) is demonstrably false with respect to Lewis' account of counterfactuals, when the truth is only that it isn't demonstrably true relative to that account? And why does he offer this false claim as a summary of what he had pointed out earlier, when what he had pointed out earlier was only that the disjunction in question isn't a consequence of Lewis' account? Could it be that Tooley has confused *not yielding A as a consequence* with *yielding not-A as a consequence*?

The two remaining complaints under the charge of lack of rigour can be dealt with more briefly. Tooley complains that 'Plantinga is often very vague, and precisely at places where maximum clarity is required' (p. 363); his example of vagueness is my giving a necessary rather than a necessary and sufficient condition of an action's being free. But all my argument required, obviously, was a necessary condition; and rigour is not served by introducing unnecessary clutter. He also complains that

> Secondly, Plantinga has a tendency to portray as deep, questions that are often quite trivial. For example:
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>> Was it within the power of an omnipotent God to create just any logically possible world? This is the important question for the Free Will Defense, and a subtle question it is. (p. 168)
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> The subtlety of this question is not easy to see. One would have thought that among the logically possible worlds are some that contain a physical universe that is not causally dependent upon anything else, either directly or indirectly. Such worlds could not be created by God. (pp. 363-364)

But this is to ignore the whole classical conception of God; on that conception there aren't any such possible worlds. On the classical conception, God is a necessary being who has essentially the property of being such that whatever physical universe (if any) exists, is causally dependent upon him; but then it's not possible that there exist a physical universe not causally dependent upon him.

II *Misemphasis and Misinterpretation*

So much for Tooley's claim that my discussion of the argument from evil suffers from undue lack of rigour. Another of my errors in *The Nature of Necessity,* he thinks, was to expend much more space on the incompatibility thesis than on the probabilistic argument from evil (the claim that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God is improbable or unlikely with respect to the amount and kinds of evil the world contains). Why was that an error? In a section entitled 'Plantinga's Misemphases and

Misinterpretations' Tooley gives two reasons; in the first place, he thinks, 'the argument from evil is best understood as a probabilistic argument' (my misemphasis), and in the second place, he claims, those philosophers I cite as endorsing the incompatibility thesis didn't in fact mean to endorse it (my misinterpretation). Now I ascribe the incompatibility thesis to three contemporary philosophers: Henry Aiken, J. L. Mackie, and H. J. McCloskey. According to Tooley, 'It may be that Aiken was committed to the incompatibility theses' (p. 361); Mackie and McCloskey, he thinks, were not.

Well, suppose we take a look at what Mackie and McCloskey *say.* Here is what Mackie says in the piece under discussion:

> I think, however, that a more telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another so that the theologian can maintain his position only by a much more extreme rejection of reason than in the former case. He must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be *disproved* from other beliefs he holds.[5]

He goes on to say

> In its simplist form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true, the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three. . . .
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> However the contradition does not arise immediately: to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good,' 'evil,' and 'omnipotent.' These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. (p. 201)

On the basis of this passage I ascribe to Mackie the view that

(1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good

is incompatible or inconsistent with

(2) There is evil.

According to Tooley, however, Mackie did not mean, in these passages, to claim that there is an incompatibility here; he carelessly misspoke himself. These passages, says Tooley, 'must be viewed as somewhat careless statements of the positions being defended'. (p. 362) Again, it is hard to take Tooley

[5] Evil and Omnipotence, *Mind,* 1955, p. 200.

seriously. Mackie explicitly says that there is a contradiction or incompatibility here and he explicitly says so several times. How, then, can Tooley expect us to take seriously the claim that Mackie did *not* intend to assert the incompatibility thesis? In any case there is one point on which Tooley is quite correct: if Mackie didn't mean to claim that (1) is incompatible with (2), then he certainly was 'somewhat careless'. *Monumentally* careless would be more like it. But Mackie isn't even a somewhat careless writer, and it is entirely clear that he meant what he said: that (1) is inconsistent with (2).

What could possibly have led Tooley to think Mackie *didn't* hold the incompatibility thesis, in the face of these explicit statements? Another confusion:

> ... Mackie, in his discussion of the claim that the universe might be better with some evils than it could be if there were none at all, grants that some evils ('first order evils') may be *logically* necessary for some goods ('second order goods') whose value outweigh the disvalue of the first order evils. So Mackie does not reject the contention that it is possible that evil may be a logically necessary part of the best of all possible worlds. (p. 362)

But what is this 'so' doing here? Mackie grants, at least for purposes of argument, that some evils may be logically necessary conditions for some goods; but is that a reason for supposing he didn't really think (1) and (2) inconsistent? Of course not. Obviously an atheologian might concede that some evils are necessary conditions of some goods and consistently add both that if there is a best of all possible worlds, then it contains no evil, and that (1) and (2) are inconsistent. Suppose *G* is a substantial good and *E* an evil it outweighs. Then *G and E,* a conjunctive state of affairs including both *G* and *E,* will be a good state of affairs of which an evil state of affairs —*E*— is a logically necessary condition. So obviously some evil states of affairs are logically necessary conditions of some good states of affairs; but equally obviously, one who concedes this point can consistently go on to say that a wholly good all-knowing and all-powerful being wouldn't permit any of the goods that include evil, since he could achieve a better universe by permitting no evil at all. So what is Tooley's reason for insisting that I have 'seriously misrepresented' Mackie in ascribing the incompatibility thesis to him? No more than the fact that Mackie concedes the truth of a proposition quite compatible with that thesis.

Now (more briefly) how about McCloskey? His piece begins with the following words:

> Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil on the one hand and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other. God cannot be both all-powerful and perfectly good if evil is real. This contradiction is well set out in its detail by Mackie in his discussion of the problem.[6]

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[6] 'God and Evil' *Philosophical Quarterly,* 1960, p. 97.

Now it must be conceded that McCloskey's article doesn't do much by way of substaining this claim; but that is scarcely grounds for supposing that he didn't mean to make it. In any event, if McCloskey didn't mean to claim that there is a contradiction here, then he has expressed himself badly indeed. Given that he *says* there is a contradiction here, it is not at all surprising that people should think he meant to say that there is a contradiction here.

So much for the misrepresentation charge. How about the 'misemphasis'? According to Tooley, 'Plantinga focuses attention upon the wrong version of the argument, and in attempting to justify this decision, he seriously misrepresents the claims made by many proponents of the argument from evil'. (p. 360) In his concluding peroration he adds that 'the logical incompatibility version of the argument from evil is not one of the crucial versions' and that 'Plantinga, in attempting to foster the illusion that it is, is guilty of seriously misrepresenting the claims made by contemporary proponents of the argument from evil'. (p. 375) We have already seen what there is to be said for the charge of serious misrepresentation. What about the other charge — that I focus attention upon the wrong version of the argument? Tooley complains several times in this piece and in his review of *The Nature of Necessity* that I devote almost thirty pages to the incompatibility thesis and less than three to the probabilistic argument. On *this* point Tooley is correct (and if that proportion constitutes, as he says, one of my 'misemphases', then I have redressed the balance in 'The Probabilistic Argument from Evil'[7] where I devote more than fifty pages to the probabilistic argument and less than two to the incompatibility thesis). But *was* it a 'misemphasis'? I believe the probabalistic argument *is* the more important — *now*. For now, as opposed to twenty or twenty-five years ago, most atheologians have conceded that in fact there isn't any inconsistency between the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God and the existence of the evil the world contains. It was not always thus, however, and prior to twenty years ago nearly every atheologian who offered an argument from evil, urged some version of the incompatibility thesis. It is heartening to see that the atheologians are giving up the incompatibility thesis and are now prepared to concede that there is no contradiction here: that's progress. But the claim that they never meant to say there *was* one, is, in view of their own explicit statements, a bit hard to credit.

III *The Probabilistic Argument*

I turn finally to Tooley's comments on what I say (in *The Nature of Necessity*) on the probabilistic argument from evil. This is in a way less important; that three page discussion has been superseded by 'The Probabilistic Argument From Evil'. Nevertheless I'd like to set the record straight.

The version of this argument I considered involves the contention that

(1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good

may perhaps be logically compatible with statements like

7 *Philosophical Studies* 1979, pp. 1-53.

(40) There are 10^{13} turps of evil;

nevertheless, (1) is unlikely or improbable with respect to (40). By way of disputing this contention I first defined ⌜*p* disconfirms *q*⌝ as ⌜the probability of *q* on *p* is less than ½⌝ and then claimed that (40) does not disconfirm

(37) All the evil in the world is broadly moral evil; and every world that God could have actualised and that contains as much good as the actual world displays, contains at least 10^{13} turps of evil.

I then concluded that (40) does not disconfirm (41), which is the conjunction of (37) with (1).

Now Tooley objects to this argument at more than one point. He devotes the bulk of his discussion, however, to my inferring

(10) (40) does not disconfirm (41) (i.e., the conjunction of (37) with (1))

from

(11) (40) does not disconfirm (37);

this inference, he says, is 'demonstrably fallacious'. (p. 375) How does he propose to demonstrate the fallacy? First, he claims that in arguing from (11) to (10) I am employing the following pattern of inference:

p does not disconfirm *q*
r&q entails *p*

Therefore *p* does not disconfirm *r&q*.

He then makes heavy weather over arguing that this pattern of inference isn't valid. (His argument, incidentally, depends on the false assumption that for each of (37), (40) and (1), there are at most finitely many equivalence classes of structurally isomorphic possible worlds in which it is true.) But this argument form is *obviously* invalid. *r*, for example, could be the denial of *p*, *q* chosen appropriately. Or, where *d* is a fair die, *p* could be *d will come up 1 or 2 or 3; q d will come up 1 or 2*, and *r d won't come up 2*. The argument form is obviously invalid; but my inference of (10) from (11) didn't depend on it. Rather, what I had in mind was this: (37) entails the existence of God; but it is a necessary truth (given the classical conception of God) that if God exists, then he is omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good, and the creator of the universe (i.e., the creator of whatever universe there is). (37), therefore, entails (1); hence it is equivalent in the broadly logical sense to its conjunction with (1), i.e., (41). But then it follows by the probability calculus that if (40) does not disconfirm (37), then (40) does not disconfirm (41).

Tooley goes on to bring up what he considers a 'crucial objection' to the free will defence (taken as a response to the probabalistic argument from evil); he complains that I 'make no serious attempt' (in *The Nature of Necessity*) to answer it. Since I didn't consider this objection in that three page discussion, it is scarcely surprising that I made no attempt, serious or otherwise, to answer it there. I do, however, take up and reply to its essentials in 'The Probabilistic Argument From Evil', which I recommend to Tooley's attention.