

MORAL EVIL AND HUMAN FREEDOM: A REPLY TO TIERNO

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Abstract

Many theists believe that the so-called 'free will defence' successfully undermines the antitheist argument from moral evil. However, in a recent issue of this journal Joel Thomas Tierno provides the 'adequacy argument' in order to show an alleged difficulty with the free will defence. I argue that the adequacy argument fails because it equivocates on the notion of moral evil.

1. Introduction

The argument from moral evil is often regarded as one of the most powerful challenges to traditional theism. It states, roughly, that the existence of moral evil in this world entails that a necessarily omnipotent, necessarily omnibenevolent God could not have created this world. According to many theists, however, the so-called 'free will defence' defeats the argument.¹ The free will defence is construed as an attempt to shift the responsibility for moral evil from God to human beings. That is, according to the defence, the existence of moral evil does not undermine the

traditional conception of God because free human beings, rather than God, are to blame for the existence of moral evil.

In a recent issue of this journal, Joel Thomas Tierno² argues that the free will defence fails to shift the entirety of responsibility for moral evil from God to human beings. The aim of this short piece is to show that Tierno's argument is unsuccessful because it equivocates on the notion of moral evil.

2. The Adequacy Argument

Tierno argues that the free will defence is fallacious because it fails to distinguish the following two things: (a) an adequate explanation of human beings' capacity to make choices that produce moral evil; and (b) an adequate explanation of the actuality of choices that produce moral evil (p. 1). Tierno regards (b) as being much more important than (a) for the argument from moral evil.

Tierno is willing to hold, at least for the sake of argument, that the fact that human beings have free will satisfies (a). However, against proponents of the free will defence, he holds that it is not sufficient for (b). Tierno claims that the free will defence does not explain why human beings *actually* exercise their capacity to make choices that produce moral evil. Given that almost all human beings exercise that capacity while they do not exercise many other capacities, Tierno says, there must be 'something more than the mere capacity for choice' (p. 3).

Tierno calls his argument the 'adequacy argument' and schematises it as follows:

The Adequacy Argument

- (1) God created human beings.
- (2) God gave human beings the capacity for choice.

(3) The capacity for choice underlies all kinds of capacities that few human beings realise.

(4) We almost universally use the capacity for choice, at one time or another, in ways that bring about moral evil.

Therefore,

(5) There must be something about human beings other than the mere capacity for choice which accounts for the almost universal disposition to commit morally evil actions. (pp. 3-4)

(1) and (2) seem innocuous.³ Tierno motivates (3) as follows:

The mere presence of a capacity does not account for the extensive exercise of that capacity. With the capacity for choice comes the capacity for all kinds of decisions and subsequent actions. We have the power to destroy ourselves. We have the power to live as celibates. We have the power to give away all of our earthly goods and devote the remainder of our lives to enlightened altruism—altruism that permits the satisfaction of the agent's survival needs. Some people exercise these capacities. The overwhelming majority do not. (p. 3)

I accept (3) for the sake of argument. In the following, however, I demonstrate that the adequacy argument is unsuccessful because it equivocates on the notion of moral evil in (4).

3. Rejecting (4)

(4) states that we almost universally use the capacity for choice, at one time or another, in ways that bring about moral evil. Tierno motivates this premise as follows:

Moral evil is something nearly all people do at one time or another. Reflect on this. How many of the people of your acquaintance, on at least one occasion, have acted for the specific purpose of causing another human being to suffer? The exceptions are few. Of the exceptions, how many have acted for a selfish purpose fully recognizing that this would cause an innocent person to suffer? Probably most have. (p. 3)

As the above passage shows, Tierno tries to prove (4) inductively. However, his proof is incomplete because it is not clear what exactly he means by 'causing another human being to suffer' or acting 'for a selfish purpose fully recognizing that this would cause an innocent person to suffer'. In particular, it is not clear what degree of suffering an action has to cause in order for it to be recognised by Tierno as a morally evil action. For example, does one have to kill someone intentionally in order for one to be said to perform a morally evil action? Or is it sufficient for one only, say, to ask children to wash dishes when one is fully aware that they are reluctant to do so?

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that by 'morally evil' actions Tierno means ones that intentionally cause major trouble in someone's life, such as committing rape or causing serious bodily harm. Call a state of affairs caused by such an action a 'significantly bad result'. Under this supposition (4) is rephrased as follows:

(4') We almost universally use the capacity for choice, at one time or another, in ways that bring about significantly bad results.

If (4') is true then it seems possible to derive (5) by combining (4') with the fact that most human beings *do not* exercise their capacity to make choices that produce certain other kinds of results. However, the problem with (4') is that it is simply false. Not many people exercise, and in fact almost no one around me exercises, the capacity for choice in ways that bring about significantly bad results. In sum, if (4) is construed as (4') then while the adequacy argument is valid it turns out to be unsound.

Suppose then by 'morally evil actions' Tierno means actions that cause only minor trouble in someone's life, such as telling a bad joke or ringing and waking up someone in the middle of the night. Call a state of affairs caused by such actions a 'mildly bad result'. Under this supposition (4) is rephrased as follows:

(4'') We almost universally use the capacity for choice, at one time or another, in ways that bring about mildly bad results.

Setting aside people who do not have enough time or ability to perform mildly bad actions in their lives (e.g. those who die in infancy, etc.), (4'') is, contrary to (4'), almost uncontroversially true. As Tierno says, it is hard to imagine anyone who never performs a mildly bad action in his/her life. However, (4'') raises a difficulty of its own. That is, we cannot derive (5) from the conjunction of (4'') and the fact that most human beings *do not* exercise their capacity to make choices that produce certain other kinds of results. For the label 'the capacity to make choices that produce mildly bad results' is too general. It is unfair to compare the fact that everyone exercises a very general capacity which can be referred to as a 'capacity to make choice to produce mildly bad results' with the fact that most human beings do not exercise a capacity to make such very specific choices as destroying themselves,

living as celibates or giving away all of their earthly goods (p. 3). It is true that while most human beings exercise the former capacity they do not exercise the latter, but it is true only *to the extent that it is trivially true*; for the former is much more general than the latter. It is unreasonable to conclude from this unfair comparison that there exists some hidden mechanism that could be attributed to a creator of this world. The mere fact that many different states of affairs that human beings bring about can be labelled as 'mildly bad results' does not imply anything that is inconsistent with the traditional conception of God. In sum, if (4) is construed as (4'') then while (4) is true the whole argument turns out to be invalid because its premises do not support the conclusion.

4. Conclusion

I have shown that there is an equivocation on the notion of 'moral evil' in Tierno's adequacy argument. Under one interpretation of 'moral evil' (4) is false and the argument turns out to be unsound. Under the other interpretation of 'moral evil', however, while (4) is true the argument turns out to be invalid. Therefore, in neither case does the argument succeed in undermining the free will defence.

¹ The most prominent contemporary advocate of the free will defence is Alvin Plantinga. See Plantinga (1967), *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press; Plantinga (1974), *God, Freedom and Evil*, Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Plantinga (1974), *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

² Joel Thomas Tierno (2001), 'On the Alleged Connection Between Moral Evil and Human Freedom', *Sophia* Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 1-6.

³One anomalous feature of Tierno's schematisation is that premises (1) and (2) are irrelevant to the conclusion (5). (5) is supposed to be entailed by (3) and (4) and it has nothing to do with (1) and (2). I take that Tierno intends to use (1) and (2) to derive a further conclusion that a creator of this world, if it exists at all, cannot be necessarily omnipotent and necessarily omnibenevolent.