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On Mackie's Paradox of Omnipotence: A Solution and Subsequent Problems

by

Ryan Nichols

J. L. Mackie, opposing Christian theism, argues in support of the famed problem of evil. He concludes his argument with a version of the paradox of omnipotence. A refutation of this paradox does in no way alleviate the entire problem of evil, but it does assist in making Christianity more reasonable. Prior to this task I will first state this paradox in full, and next enumerate the consequence for the theist; then a reconciliation and problem solving can begin.

I would endeavor to give a possible answer, a defense, to Mackie's charge and conclude, contrary to Mackie, that it is most probable God has a good reason for not intervening to halt the wrong willing people do. I charge that if it were the case, God did intervene each time someone willed to do moral evil (which is the type of evil this paper is confined to), we would no longer have free will (hereafter FW). FW could be called a more important or greater good than the lack of both evil and FW, i.e. it seems plausible that the evil allowed in the world by FW could be outweighed by the immense good of having FW.

First, what is claimed in the paradox of omnipotence? Mackie states that there is a fundamental difficulty in the notion of an omnipotent God creating men with free will, for if men's wills are really free this must mean that even God cannot control them, that is, that God is no longer omnipotent. (Mackie 230)

This says that if we humans have FW then God is not omnipotent. Later in the article Mackie reformulates the paradox explicitly by posing the questions "can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control? Or. . .make rules which then bind himself? (Mackie 231). It is imperative that the carefully reading theist understand how Mackie uses "cannot."

Does Mackie give thoughtful and correct support for bringing in the strong term "cannot"? I think that he does not and I argue also that Mackie does not adequately treat the rebuttal that Christian theists typically set forth, namely that God has the ability to control human wills but refrains from doing so. Unfortunately, Mackie's support comes in the form of the above two rhetorical questions, which is a poor way to support a position. The question he poses with which we must grapple is "why should he [God] not leave men free to will rightly, but intervene when he sees them beginning to will wrongly?" (Mackie 230). I assume Mackie is implying that there is no reasonable answer to this question. Mackie wants to use "cannot" in reference to God's inability to control beings with FW, so if we find a plausible answer to this question, God would be found to have a possible reason why he would choose not to control human wills when they will wrongly. Our first task, before giving such a response, is to determine more pre-

Nichols '95: On Mackie's Paradox of Omnipotence: A Solution and Subsequent Precisely what Mackie intends to claim with this rhetorical question, reforming it to render the query more understandable.

What does Mackie mean by using the term "will"? Understanding Mackie's use of this term is essential. It is possible that "will" could merely mean a choice, staying in the mind, e.g. I am able to will, or choose, to have Fruit Loops rather than Raisin Bran tomorrow for breakfast. I would reject this as Mackie's understanding, however, for I do not think he intends to ask why God would not intervene when he knows humans are willing or have willed evil choices, but rather when he sees them ready to act upon those choices. Mackie is not defining "will" as choice in thought only, but in action as well. The term "free will" is most often understood by society in this form; governmental laws are meant to punish for the acted out choices of the will. Mackie refers to "man's choices and consequent actions" but without specific reference to defining "will" (Mackie 230). Given this allusion and the above information we must take this as Mackie's definition of "will."

The question he raises now becomes, "why should God not leave men free to will, to determine both choices and carry out actions based on those choices, rightly, but intervene when he sees them beginning to will, determine choices and carry out actions, wrongly?" By "intervene" I understand Mackie to mean "control and put a halt to" this evil or wrong act of willing. Mackie is not thoroughly clear here either and he may intend to convey merely "influence," perhaps in the form of a divine voice. I will however make his claim stronger, based on his parallel use of the term "controlling" in the previous sentence (Mackie 230). Now it is seen that Mackie asks, "why should God not allow men to will and act rightly and put a halt to their would-be subsequent action when they will wrongly?" By "wrongly", I take Mackie to mean "evilly," because he uses these terms interchangeably, as will I.

The consequence for the theist is fairly clear. If Mackie's question is without a reasonable response then it would seem Christian theism is incoherent. Traditional Christians include an omnipotent and wholly good God in their set of beliefs. Mackie seems to claim that the point of conflict is that this God would need to halt all the evil willing in order to be consistent with his supposed metaphysical attributes.

Thankfully, the answer is not as complex as forming the understandable question we have before us from Mackie's original. Is there a possible reason why God should not do this? Let us, by analogy, suppose that God did in fact put a halt to someone's acting out of a wrong will and that eating Fruit Loops is decidedly wrong. I am infatuated with Fruit Loops but every instance in which I attempt to

eat a bite, my lips seal shut. This happens when using a spoon, a fork, my hands-
-everything. I have tried eating them in many different locations and even in
different positions, but fortunately, I have never been successful in my attempt.

Do I have a FW in regard to the eating of Fruit Loops? No, I do not. Recall
that Mackie and I defined FW as more than a mental choice, to include the conse-
quent action the choice may bring about. I am no longer able to freely will myself
to eat Fruit Loops because some force has prevented me from doing so; i.e., since
I am halted every time I try to partake of them, I am left without the FW to eat
them, because to have FW means to possess a mental choice and to act on that
choice if I so desire. If God intervened, or halted, the evil willings that humans
do then humans would no longer have a FW. Thus, the good reason God may
possibly have for not intervening is the maintenance of human FW.

Mackie's conclusion hinges on what he think's he's shown, namely that a
wholly good, omnipotent God should "leave men free to will rightly, but intervene
when he sees them beginning to will wrongly" (Mackie 230). However, God may
have a good reason for not intervening. Namely that if he were to intervene every
time humans began to "will wrongly", then those humans would no longer have a
FW, since will is both thinking a choice and acting it out. So, it is quite plausible
that God chooses not to control human wills because the freedom of will is a
greater good than the evil which results from willing wrongly, making and acting
on evil decisions. Mackie then states that "if God could do this, but does not, and if
he is wholly good, the only explanation could be that even a wrong free act of will
is not really evil, that its freedom is a value which outweighs its wrongness. . ."
(Mackie 230-31).

Mackie ends this passage by saying that the FW solution of the problem
"can be maintained only in the form that God has made men so free that he
cannot control their wills" (Mackie 231). This leaves Mackie's next argument of
advocating the paradox of omnipotence on unsure ground because he states that
the paradox raises the question, "can an omnipotent being make things which he
cannot subsequently control" (Mackie 231). Certainly having a good reason for
refraining from control and lacking the ability to control are two wholly different
circumstances. Dissenting with Mackie's argument, I maintain it is consistent
to claim that God has the ability to control human FW but chooses not to for a
plausible reason.

It may be argued, in defense of Mackie, that we cannot have FW if God is
omnipotent. However, it seems very reasonable that God is able to loan beings
FW. This is not to say that he is limited because the FWs are free, and thus un-
controllable by God, but rather that they are free and can be controlled by God, but

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are not currently under His control. Mackie uses an analogy, speaking of the paradox of omnipotence in terms of a paradox of sovereignty. He asks, "could the British parliament make a law forbidding any future parliament to socialize banking, and also forbidding the future repeal of this law itself?" (Mackie 231). This does not parallel the situation that God faces. It would be more useful to conceive of this situation as FW being a special loan to humans from God, which is potentially subject to change from moment to moment. He is able to take it away and is not legally bound to continue refraining from controlling our wills. Judeo-Christian scripture records no pact or law in which God says he will grant us FW forever. An omnipotent and omnibenevolent God has the ability to determine the wills of humans, but presumably does not do this most of the time.

However, there seems to be a problem in holding the troublesome and tenuous conclusion that God refrains from controlling the wills of humans (given our definition of FW that includes the mental choice and consequent action) and yet miracles do happen; for any single miracle in which God violates someone's FW, means that at some point in time that person was without FW. A few illustrations would be useful, even though finding the perfect one is difficult. Suppose that I have a vendetta against Daniel and therefore I make the premeditated mental choice to kill him. I then actualize this choice by dismembering him so that he is undoubtedly dead. Next I realize that his six parts are suddenly reforming before my eyes; he is back together and whole instantly. Dan tells me that it was a miracle. The question to decide is whether or not he is consistent in holding that God has loaned humans FW, and maintaining that such a miracle occurred and was willed by his God.

If a miracle took place and God intervened to heal Dan, and if FW is defined to include both choice and action, then it follows that I, the murderer of Dan, was relieved, however briefly, from possessing FW. This is because the consequent action I had performed was changed, reversed in this case. The Christian could reply to this argument in one of three ways. First, one may say that this analogy is nonsensical because no miracles in similar fashion are purported to happen in the New Testament. On this point Mackie and I may agree, but this does in no way seriously damage the argument. All that needs to be shown is that someone's FW has been ignored or taken away, even though there is not such an obvious example in scripture as the previous one.

Take the crucifixion of Jesus as an example. It is quite clear that many people wanted him dead and it suffices for my purposes to suppose that only one of them really wanted him dead. This person actualized this desire and assisted in crucifying Jesus. If Jesus rises from the dead then the murderer's FW, namely

the consequent action, is taken from him. Here the Christian may object to say that that person only "assisted" in the death and did not actualize it himself. The Christian must then say that the Roman soldier responsible for nailing Jesus to the cross did not desire, or make the mental choice to kill Jesus. This seems to me quite improbable, but reasonable enough to cause this example some difficulty.

The same could be said of the recorded instance in which Peter apparently makes the mental choice of cutting off an ear of one of the people who came to capture Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane and then actualized it. Jesus clearly violated Peter's FW by healing the soldier's ear, but the Christian may claim that by that time the mental choice of Peter had changed, Peter had repented, and therefore he desired Jesus to restore the injured soldier's ear. Jesus' action then did not violate Peter's will. Even though this seems rather counterintuitive and is non-scriptural, it may yet have some intuitive plausibility.

It seems that the miracles in the New Testament are mostly, if not entirely of the sort that FW may be left intact, i.e. miracles are performed on paralytics, lepers and other people with illnesses: people who probably made the mental choice to be healed. In most instances, the people receiving the miraculous action wanted it to happen to them. In the performance of the miracle, neither the mental choice nor the consequent action of another human was infringed upon, i.e. others did not choose and act on someone to make them paralyzed. New Testament claims aside, however, if in this instance a Christian does claim that Dan was healed by God, then my FW was infringed upon. It is impossible to think that humans have FW and also maintain that Dan was miraculously healed from wounds inflicted by my chainsaw unless they recognize that my FW was taken from me.

Another objection a second Christian theist would pose is that my definition of FW is improper and not in accord with his or her own Christian understanding. One would then probably choose to define FW as only a mental choice and not the consequent action, limiting the scope of the term. This presents a grave problem because if one wants to maintain this definition then one must say that God does control the consequent actions that people will. This leaves one open to a fatal blow from an advocate of the problem of evil. If God does control our actions and not our mental choices then he must be directly responsible for all the moral evil in the world. This theist must give up the FW defense for it would be totally undermined.

Thirdly, and most formidably, the Christian may say that God's miraculous healing of Dan is not an infringement on my FW because God was not

intervening with my consequent action. In other words, she would care to separate the results of my action (Dan's death) from the actual act of sawing his limbs off. Whereas the second objector wished to include only statement one in the definition, this third objector would draw the line between two and three. This latter has some force for it would seem that once the consequent action is finished then my exercise of FW in this situation is also.

However, I would disagree, finding that separating the results from the action is quite difficult in many circumstances without having the original mental choice violated. Imagine again that I desire to kill Dan and actualize this mental choice by killing him. It is possible to want to kill Dan for a few different reasons, at least two of which seem relevant. First, I should be doing it for the thrill the act itself, severing limbs with a chainsaw, gives me, i.e. it may be done for excitement. If this is the case then I believe this third objection would hold true because having Dan dead is not necessarily a part of my mental choice. Second, what if having Dan dead were part of my mental choice? If the reason behind my desire to kill Dan is that I really want him to be dead, then it would seem that if God resurrected him then my FW would be taken from me. This would be the case because God would have violated my mental choice for Dan to be dead, because the result of my subsequent action is undone by this miraculous action. This third objection is a sound one, but it does not totally destroy my argument, even though it does weaken it. The rebuttal would work for situations of FW where the mental choice was acted upon due to a feeling of stimulation, etc., received from the acting itself. I would think, though, that this holds true for very few incidents of FW where God would perform a miracle. For example, some of the people shouting "Crucify him!" were surely thrill-seekers wanting to see a body on a cross at Golgotha, but many, if not most, actually wanted Jesus dead, permanently.

Miracles however, are not the only Christian anomaly in jeopardy of conflicting with FW. I would argue that many forms of intercessory prayer intend to violate the FW of the one who is being prayed for. In fact, I would argue that this is quite common because much of the time intercessory prayer is implemented (excluding healings) it is used so that God will "correct" someone's life and change it to be in accord with the Christian ethic. For example, my mom prays that God would "help" me stop smoking; "help" could mean a number of different things. Probably, she would prefer that I myself wanted to quit and I act on that supposed mental choice. However, since it is not my desire to discontinue smoking, she could pray for one of two series of events, both of which, if God actualized, would infringe upon my FW.

First, she could pray for God to give me the desire to quit smoking, but here this "give" would contradict the mental choice of my wanting to smoke. Secondly, "help" might mean that my mom wishes God would force me to quit in some way, thereby inhibiting either my mental choice about the matter or the action. If God forced the notion into my mind that cigarettes are in actuality dog feces I would quit (this is quite similar to the first instance). God could, on the other hand, always make cigarettes unavailable to me, perhaps by never permitting a cashier to sell them to me. In any case, if these prayers were actualized by God I would no longer have FW in regard to smoking.

In effect, my mom was praying for a miracle to happen, and this type of miracle would violate my FW unless I did in fact want to quit--which I do not. The action of my mom praying for this does not affect my FW. Only if God did intervene would it, and if he did my mom would logically be committed to admitting that I was without FW for a time. There are implications from this that surface when using the FW defense for the problem of evil.

If my mother would want to say that God has given humanity FW because it is what makes the greater good and if she prays for me in this way then she must say that she wants God to take FW away; i. e., she wishes God "Indian give" or squelch on his "loan" of FW to humans. When this occurs it seems that the "greater good" of human FW is now in jeopardy if it is even still in existence. If she objects to Mackie by saying that God does not intervene every time people will wrongly because this would take away FW from humans, then by wanting God to occasionally intervene, it follows that she would want the FW of certain humans to be negated on occasion.

It is rational for a theist to suppose that moral evil is consistent with the existence of God, the means to this being the FW defense. However, once the theist accepts this and simultaneously wants to hold that some miracles have happened which do violate FW, it follows that rationally held belief in God is in jeopardy. Earlier I claimed that FW is a loan to humans from God. I have shown that most Christians must say that some of the miracles they posit have violated FW; God broke the loan.

So what does it matter, retorts the theist, that God has violated FW in performing some miracles or in granting intercessory prayers? It is quite relevant actually, because it would seem that God should violate FW in all the applicable situations. Therefore according to the theist, God presently selects some very few cases in which to do this. If he has taken away FW once, e.g., stopping me from smoking, then for what reason does he not stop someone from murdering another?

First, what has become of this greater good that FW produced? Surely, according to the FW defense, it is highly valued, so much so that God permits it to cause unfathomable degrees of human and animal pain. Proportionate to this surety, so must this greater good go down in flames. Second, without FW man cannot justly be said to be made in the image of God. Somehow humans are degraded into being mere puppets rudely attached to the strings God pulls--or doesn't pull--randomly.

Last, it is philosophically much more safe to say that God has never done a miracle which violated FW than to say he has done some and not others in cases, as above, which would obviously merit a violation of FW, unless of course the Christian would care to step back with the word "faith." It would be consistent for God either not to violate FW at all or violate it each time evil is willed, rendering humans with no FW. The latter is obviously not the case and, according to the theist, neither is the former. The alternative, to have a situation where God picks and chooses with seemingly little discretion whose FW to violate is extremely untenable. Unfortunately, it seems that complete certainty cannot be reached; this point is not logically inconsistent, but certainly, at the least, is non-reasonable.

In this paper I have set forth a plausible alternative to Mackie's suggestion that the only good reason God would have for not intervening when humans begin to will wrongly would be that acts of evil are not really evil. This alternative solution is that if God did intervene every time humans willed wrongly then humans would no longer have FW and possessing the good of FW would outweigh the evil which results from it. In this manner, I side with the Christian. However, in regard to the compatibility of some miracles and intercessory prayers I would stand at odds with the Christian. If one takes this FW defense combined with the "greater good" option, when FW is taken away from humans by God doing some miracles Christians claim he has, then the greater good caused by the FW also disappears. As of yet, there has been no reasonable argument presented to contest my argument that some happenings which Christians call miracles, if they are such, merit the violation of someone's FW. This presents problems for the Christian who wishes to bridge the two. The theist's position here is that of on a fence. In any event, the nuances of such intriguing argumentation should encourage further debate.

Ed. note: All citations of Mackie are taken from his essay in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (eds.), Philosophy of Religion. Selected Readings (Chicago: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1989), 230-1.