



# The Argument from Evil

Why doesn't God *do* something?

# David Hume

- The whole earth, believe me, Philo, is cursed and polluted. A perpetual war is kindled amongst all living creatures. Necessity, hunger, want stimulate the strong and courageous; fear, anxiety, terror agitate the weak and infirm. The first entrance into life gives anguish to the new-born infant and to its wretched parent; weakness, impotence, distress attend each stage of that life, and it is, at last, finished in agony and horror. (p. 318)

Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs,  
Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy,  
And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy,  
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence.  
Dire was the tossing, deep the groans: *Despair*  
Tended the sick, busiest from couch to couch.  
And over them triumphant *Death* his dart  
Shook: but delay'd to strike, though oft invoc'd  
With vows, as their chief good and final hope.

(p. 319)

# Hume's Argument

... **His power, we allow, is infinite**; whatever he wills is executed; but neither man nor any other animal is happy; therefore, he does not will their happiness. **His wisdom is infinite**; he is never mistaken in choosing the means to any end; but the course of nature tends not to human or animal felicity; therefore, it is not established for that purpose. ...

In what respect, then, do his benevolence and mercy resemble the benevolence and mercy of men?

(p. 320)

- Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?
- p. 320 (quoting Epicurus)
- This is a version of the *deductive* argument from evil.

- The only method of supporting Divine benevolence—and it is what I willingly embrace—is to deny absolutely the misery and wickedness of man. Your representations are exaggerated; your melancholy views mostly fictitious; your inferences contrary to fact and experience. Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments. (p. 280)
- Does this argument succeed at defusing the argument from evil?
- Is there a better “method”?

# Darwin's Argument from Evil

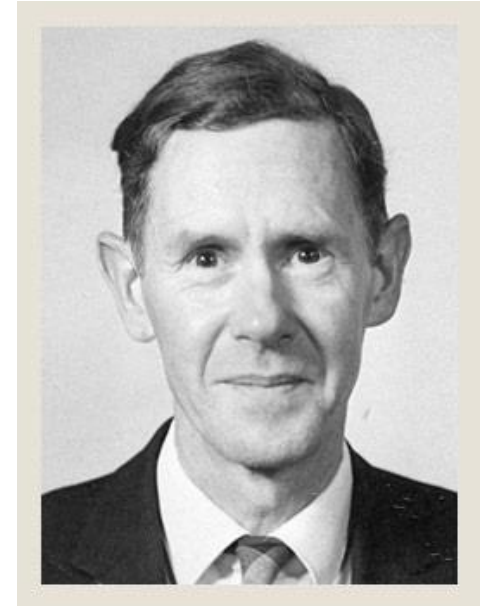
“With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.-- I am bewildered.-- I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.”

Charles Darwin, in a letter to Asa Gray, 1860.

# J. L. Mackie: deductive argument

- The four propositions:
  - God exists
  - God is perfectly good
  - God is omnipotent
  - Evil exists

are not *formally* contradictory.  
Extra premises are needed to  
create a formally deductive  
argument.





# 1. Logical argument from evil

1. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.
2. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
3. Evil exists

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4. *Suppose* that God exists, and is omnipotent and good.

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- |   |             |
|---|-------------|
| 5. God eliminates evil, as far as he can. | (From 1, 4) |
| 6. God eliminates all evil                | (2, 5)      |
| 7. Evil does not exist                    | (6)         |
| 8. <i>Contradiction</i>                   | (3, 7)      |

9. God is either not good, or limited, or non-existent (4-8)

# Responses to the logical argument

- Premises 1 and 2 are both questionable.
  - “1. A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can.”
    - What if some evils are needed to cause great goods? Or some great goods have evil side effects?
  - “2. There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.”
    - There are *logical* limits, even to omnipotence.
- These flaws open the door to “soul-making theodicy”, “free will defense”, “sceptical theism”, etc.

# Theodicy vs. defense

- **Theodicy** – Trying to give the *actual*, true explanation of why God allows evil to exist.
- **Defense** – Imagining *possible* scenarios in which a good, omnipotent God allows evil to exist.
  - These scenarios may not be true, but constructing them proves that theism is *logically consistent* with evil.

# Responses to the logical problem

- It's very difficult to prove any *logical contradiction* between theism and evil.
- For this reason, most discussion has moved to the 'evidential' argument from evil.

## 2. Inductive/Evidential Version

- This uses *inference to the best explanation*.
- The conclusion is that theism is highly *improbable*, given the quantity and quality of evil in the world. Naturalism provides *a better explanation* for the evil in the world than theism does.
- We can grant that a good, omnipotent God might create a world with the possibility of evil, and when such evil appears he might allow some of it to persist. *But not this much evil!*
- Hence theism is a very poor explanation of this world.

## 2. Inductive/Evidential Version

- Can *naturalism* explain the evil we see?
- Sure. On this view, life is a product of evolutionary processes such as natural selection.
- *These processes do not care about us.* They eliminate unfit, infertile traits, but pain and suffering are irrelevant. Parasites, pain and death during childbirth, etc. make perfect biological sense.

- Back to the logical version for now though, and Plantinga's *free will defense* against it.



# Limits to omnipotence

- Plantinga argues that even an omnipotent being has *some* limits, namely logical limits.

“Could he create square circles, for example, or married bachelors? ... These theologians and philosophers may hold that there are no *nonlogical* limits to what an omnipotent being can do, but they concede that not even an omnipotent being can bring about logically impossible states of affairs.”



“Some theists, on the other hand—Martin Luther and Descartes, perhaps—have apparently thought that God’s power is unlimited even by the laws of logic. ...”

“This view is not very popular, however, and for good reason; it is quite incoherent.”

- E.g. does every good thing eliminates every evil state of affairs that it can eliminate?
  - No, says Plantinga. He tries to correct that premise.
- (19b) A good being eliminates every evil  $E$  that it knows about and that it can eliminate without either bringing about a greater evil or eliminating a good state of affairs that outweighs  $E$ .
- *(Even 19b is false, says Plantinga. It might be possible to 'properly eliminate' in this way either  $E_1$  or  $E_2$  but not both.)*

The basic problem with deriving a contradiction from theism is that **certain goods and evils might be logically tied together**, in such a way that eliminating the evil would eliminate the good as well.

“Under what conditions would an omnipotent being be unable to eliminate a certain evil *E* without eliminating an outweighing good? Well, suppose that *E* is *included* in some good state of affairs that outweighs it.”

Good state of affairs  $\Rightarrow$  (Smaller) evil state of affairs

# Making souls

“For example, there are people who display a sort of creative moral heroism in the face of suffering and adversity—a heroism that inspires others and creates a good situation out of a bad one. In a situation like this the evil, of course, remains evil; but the total state of affairs—someone’s bearing pain magnificently, for example—may be good.”

“our discussion thus far shows at the very least that it is no easy matter to find necessarily true propositions that yield a formally contradictory set”

- Yet, as Plantinga points out, this doesn't show theism to be consistent. It just means it hasn't (yet) been *shown* to be inconsistent.

# Consistency proof?

“...to show that a set  $S$  is consistent you think of a *possible state of affairs* (it needn't *actually obtain*) which is such that if it were actual, then all of the members of  $S$  would be true. This procedure is sometimes called *giving a model of  $S$* .”

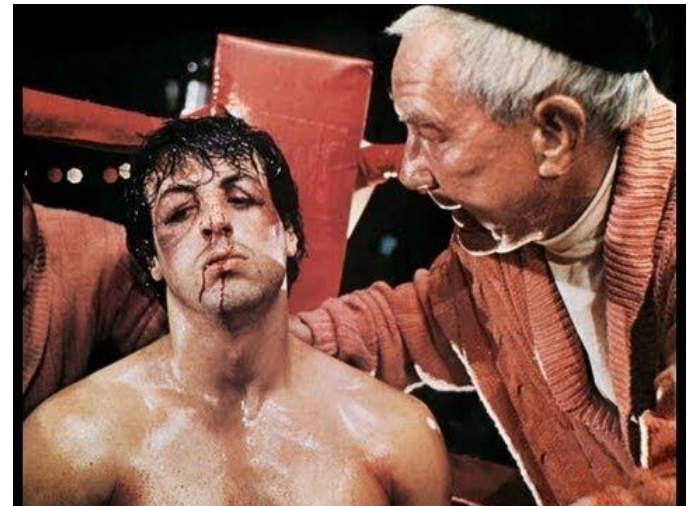
# Why God allows evil

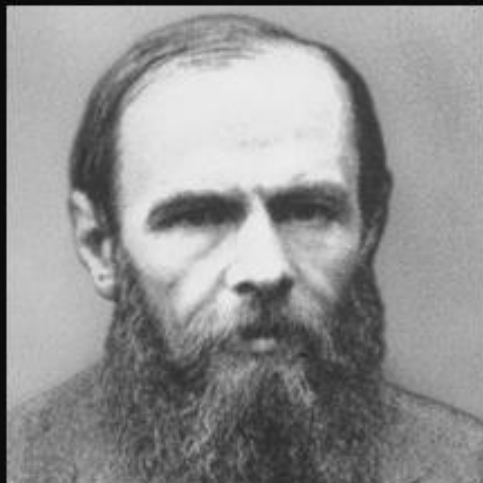
“Augustine tries to tell us *what God’s reason* is for permitting evil. At bottom, he says, it’s that God can create a more perfect universe by permitting evil. A really top-notch universe requires the existence of free, rational, and moral agents; and some of the free creatures He created went wrong. But the universe with the free creatures it contains and the evil they commit is better than it would have been had it contained neither the free creatures nor this evil.”

(I.e. Augustine gave a free will *theodicy*.)



- (N.B. In this paper Plantinga doesn't *endorse* this Augustinian view, but merely says it's possible.)
- Note that it's *only one way* of making certain goods and evils logically inseparable.
- Another is the “soul making” idea, that people only become truly great and good by overcoming evil.





I cannot truly imagine a truly  
great person who hasn't  
suffered.

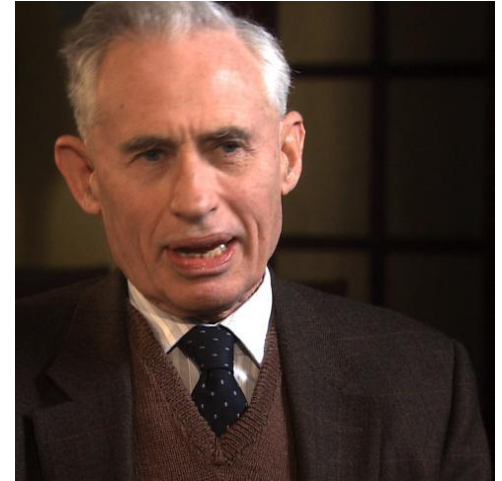
~ Fyodor Dostoevsky

# Objection to soul making

- If we follow God's example in this "soul-making" idea, then we'll stand by and do nothing at all, when we see (apparently) pointless evils that we could easily prevent.
- No more medicine, police, lifeguards, lifeboats, railings, seatbelts, etc.

# Swinburne's response

- God's *authority* over us permits him to allow us to suffer a lot. (Like a parent, not a babysitter.)
- Also, he sees far into the future, and may allow one person to suffer for the long-term benefit of that person, or even of another person.
- The same isn't true of humans, who lack such authority and knowledge.



# Problems with utilitarianism

- Our human *ignorance* imposes duties upon us. For humans, “the ends do not justify the means” because we cannot predict the ends with rational confidence.
- E.g. doctors deliberately spread cowpox, in order to fight smallpox. Predators, parasites, etc. are actually good!
- However, history is full of examples of “unintended consequences”, where evil is done to promote long-term good, yet that good never materialises.

# Free Will Defense

- The free will defense require a particular kind of free will, called *libertarian* (indeterministic) free will.
- For this kind of freedom, it's not enough that we make choices, based on our own beliefs and desires, and act on them. (For God could program robots to do that, and so ensure that they never commit evil acts.)

# Libertarian free will

“If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won’t. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it.” (Plantinga, p. 306)

# Free will and control

- The notion of *control* is crucial to libertarian free will. What is it for one system to *control* another? (E.g. a RC car is controlled by the controller.)
- Buttons/levers on the controller *cause* the car to move in *predictable* ways? (The car's behavior is deterministically caused by the controller.)
- But then, if causal determinism is true, all our actions are completely controlled by events that occurred before we were born.



# Free Will Defense

Obviously God cannot create *free* beings, in this libertarian sense, and at the same time cause them (deterministically) to do good all the time.

Creating free beings entails the *risk* (at least) of them going wrong.

# Objections

1. Libertarian free will is unnecessary (pointless, a “bizarre metaphysical conceit”, etc.) -- Dennett
2. As long as we *do what we want*, we’re free.
3. To say that a person “could have done otherwise” in a given situation is just to say that they *would* have done otherwise, had they chosen to.

# Plantinga's response to #3

“One might as well claim that being in jail doesn't really limit one's freedom on the grounds that if one were *not* in jail, he'd be free to come and go as he pleased. So I shall say no more about this objection here.”

(p. 307)

# Objection 4 (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?”

It's not logically impossible, after all, for a fair coin to land heads 1000 times in a row. So an omnipotent God can do that. (?)

- “... why could He not have made men such that they always freely choose the good?”
  - ... such that they *might* always freely choose the good?
  - Or ... such that that *must* always freely choose the good?

# Evidential argument from evil

- We can grant that a good, omnipotent God might create a world with the *possibility* of evil, and that when such evil appears he might allow *some* of it to persist.
- *But not this much!* If you were creating a world, any world you wanted (within logical limits) would you create *this* world? Not likely.
- Hence theism is a very poor explanation of this world.

# Is the actual suffering excessive?

- We cannot be *certain*, perhaps, that the suffering in the world is excessive in this way. But are we *justified* in believing that it is?
- If the purpose of suffering is that we develop compassion, generosity, perseverance, etc. then surely this could be achieved at a lower dose?
  - (With medicine, for example, the risk of side effects means that one generally prescribes at the *lowest effective dose*.)

# Objections to the Evidential Argument

- A. We are too ignorant to judge whether there's "too much" evil in the world. ("Sceptical theism")
- B. On the total evidence, God exists. "We can lose this battle (not too badly) but still win the war"
- C. The case of (e.g.) the saved miners. Isn't this evidence of a God who cares for us?
- D. The quantity of evils means that God expects a lot of us. If evils were less, then he'd be treating us like children.



# Sceptical theism

We cannot see why God would allow so much suffering, so probably there is no reason.

But, if God had a reason, would we be able to see what it was? Usually, for an argument from ignorance to work, we need to say that *if the thing did exist then we would see it*. E.g.

I don't see any elephant in this room

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∴ There is no elephant in this room

The SETI program hasn't found any evidence of ET intelligence

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∴ There is no extra-terrestrial intelligent life

This epistemic principle is sometimes called 'CORNEA', short for: '**C**ondition **O**n **R**ea**s**o**N**able **E**pistemic **A**ccess'

If God had a reason for *this much* suffering, would we be able to see what it was?

# Alston's Inventory

- Bill Alston lists 6 human limitations here:
  1. Lack of relevant *data*.
  2. *Complexity* greater than we can handle.
  3. Difficulty of determining what is metaphysically possible or necessary.
  4. Ignorance of the full range of possibilities.
  5. Ignorance of the full range of moral values.
  6. Limits to our capacity to make well-considered value judgments.

# E.g. complexity

“On the night that Sir Winston Churchill was conceived, had Lady Randolph Churchill fallen asleep in a slightly different position, the precise pathway that each of the millions of spermatozoa took would have been slightly altered. As a result...Sir Winston Churchill, as we knew him, would not have existed, with the likely result that the evolution of World War II would have been substantially different...”

- (Kirk Durston, “The consequential complexity of history and gratuitous evil”, *Religious Studies*, 2000, p. 66)

# Which answer is most reasonable?

*Given*  $A = -7 + 2 - 3 + 1 + 2 +$  millions of unknown numbers of unknown sign,

$B = 4 + 2 +$  millions of additional unknown numbers of unknown sign.

*Question* Is  $A - B$  positive or negative?

(1)  $A - B$  is positive;

(2)  $A - B$  is negative; and



(3) agnosticism regarding the sign of  $A - B$ .

# Response 1 to sceptical theism

- Even if we think we couldn't see God's reason for allowing so much evil, there might still be good reason to think that theism is false.
- For example, the world might have existed for only 6000 years. Or all this might only be a computer-generated fantasy (as in the *Matrix*). *If those scenarios were true, then we wouldn't be able to tell.*
- Does that mean we should regard such scenarios as quite possibly true?
- Not if they're still *implausible*. (Can we say why they're implausible?)

- In a similar way, the theory that God is good and omnipotent, but has his own reasons to allow (and even use) evil is arguably *implausible*.
- For example, the theistic story is relatively *complicated*. Naturalism is simpler, saying that the universe is amoral, and doesn't care about us. Shit happens, etc.
- Suffering *appears* to be pointless because it *is* pointless. (The world appears to be billions of years old because it is billions of years old.)

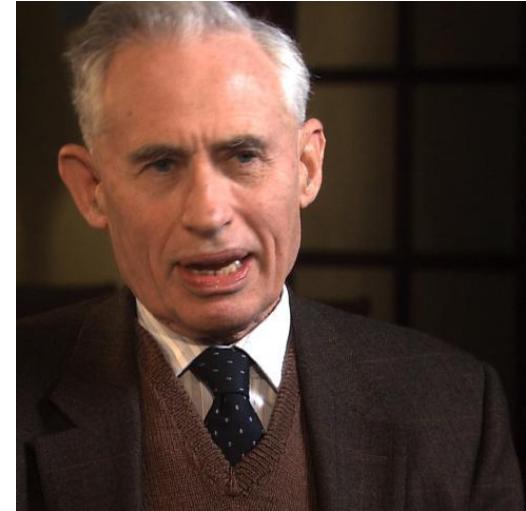
# Response 2 to sceptical theism

- If correct in its scepticism, sceptical theism actually weakens the design arguments *for* God's existence.
- Design arguments (especially those in IBE form) *assume that we can **expect** God to do certain things* (e.g. create intelligent life, fine tune the universe for life).
  - But in that case, can't we also expect God to make a world with only limited amounts of evil?



# Richard Swinburne

“A theistic response to the problem of evil”, in *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart Brown



“Creatures determining in cooperation their own character and future, and that of the universe in which they live, coming in the process to show charity, forgiveness, faith, and self-sacrifice is such a worthwhile thing that **a creator would not be unjustified in making or permitting a certain amount of evil** in order that they should be realized.”

# Natural disasters?

- Swinburne: God created a “basically good but half-finished universe”. It’s our job to tame it. Go to work engineers!
  - Earthquake-proof buildings
  - Houses on stilts (in case of flood)
  - Flood defenses
  - Potable water
  - Sustainable agriculture, etc.
- “I suggest that to create a universe of the third kind would be no bad thing, for it gives to creatures the privilege of making their own universe.”

# Suffering gives life meaning?

- Mental suffering and anguish are a man's proper tribute to losses and failures, and a world in which men were immunized from such reactions to things going wrong would be a worse world than ours. ... a man who feels no grief at the death of his child or the seduction of his wife is rightly branded by us as insensitive, for he has failed to pay the proper tribute of feeling to others ... only a world in which men feel sympathy for losses experienced by their friends, is a world in which love has full meaning. (pp. 27-8)

# Evil is temporary?

- My theodocist has argued that if a creator is to make a universe of this kind, then evils of various kinds may inevitably—at any rate temporarily—belong to such a universe; and that it is not a morally bad thing to create such a universe despite the evils. (p. 29)

# Is there *too much* evil?

If two boys are hitting each other, then a parent may stand back and let them sort it out. (A babysitter can't.)

But if they start really hurting each other, then of course the parent gets between them. The parent *sets a limit* to the amount of harm they may do to each other.

Swinburne says that there *are* limits to how much evil God will allow.

– But God seems to have a very high limit!

# Why doesn't God intervene?

- As noted before, free beings are likely to create evil. And a lot of it is likely to be pointless (it doesn't bring about a greater good), unless perhaps God intervenes.
  - God could intervene either to prevent the evil, or to use it to bring about some later good.
- However, perhaps God would allow some evil that is *truly pointless*, in the sense that it doesn't lead to some particular good in the long run.
  - God might see a need for something like Star Trek's "Prime Directive", i.e. a general policy against tinkering, and intervene only rarely.
  - (E.g. humans should be left to sort out their own mess.)

# Parable of the weeds

(Matthew 13:24-30)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘**Do you want us to go and pull them up?**’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: **First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned**; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

# Why doesn't God intervene?





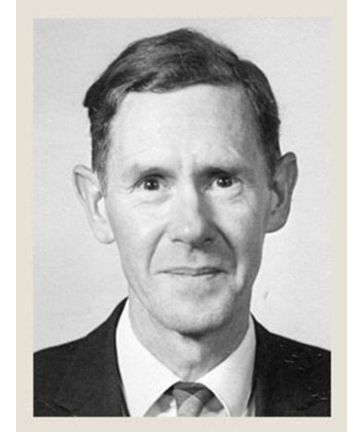
Why  
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# Jesus's solution to evil = the Fall

1. Evil is due to bad government (humans rejected God's rule in the Fall).
    - (humans cannot govern themselves, so the Kingdom of God is coming).
  2. Humans have evil hearts, as a result of the Fall, so cannot enter the Kingdom of God without being 'born again'.
    - (This is some kind of renewal/purification process.)
- Jesus's death and resurrection somehow makes #2 possible.

# Further points by Mackie



Mackie notes that good and evil exist in higher and lower forms.

Pain, suffering = Evil (1) (first-order evil)

Pleasure, comfort = Good (1)

Heroism, sympathy, benevolence = Good (2)

Theists argue that Evil (1) is needed to produce Good (2), which is what God *really* wants.

# Mackie's Responses

1. Good (2) isn't good *in itself*, but only *derivatively*, insofar as it produces Good (1).
2. On this view God is rather harsh. He doesn't care too much about our suffering.
3. (The "fatal objection".) "Our analysis shows clearly the possibility of the existence of a *second* order evil, an evil (2) contrasting with good (2) as evil (1) contrasts with good (1). This would include malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice ..."

## 2. Evil is necessary as a *means* to good

In its simple form this has little plausibility as a solution of the problem of evil, since **it obviously implies a severe restriction of God's power**. It would be a *causal* law that you cannot have a certain end without a certain means, so that if God has to introduce evil as a means to good, he must be subject to at least some causal laws. This certainly conflicts with what a theist normally means by omnipotence.

(p. 322-3)

- Would this be a *causal* law?

# A further problem with the FW defense

...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.

It may be objected that God's gift of freedom to men does not mean that he *cannot* control their wills, but that he always *refrains* from controlling their wills.