



The atheist's free will offence

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Abstract. This paper criticizes the assumption, omnipresent in contemporary philosophy of religion, that a perfectly good and loving God would wish to confer on (at least some) finite persons free will. An alternative mode of Divine-human relationship is introduced and shown to be as conducive to the realization of value as one involving free will. Certain implications of this result are then revealed, to wit, that the theist's free will defence against the problem of evil is unsuccessful, and what is more, that free will, if it exists, provides positive support for atheism.

That God might create persons and yet not give any of them free will¹ is quite generally disbelieved in contemporary philosophy of religion. The drama regularly rehearsed in the literature, involving the progress toward deeper perfection (or recovery from deep imperfection) of creatures who are the ultimate source of their own actions, has caught the imagination of pretty much everyone, and philosophers have little inclination to consider alternatives to this picture when thinking about what sort of world a perfectly good creator would actualize. But appearing as it does in philosophy, such a consensus is, I suggest, cause for suspicion. Complacency or acquiescence in cultural or religious prejudice may as well be the source of it as genuine and indisputable insight. This paper accordingly gives alternative pictures a closer look. In its first section I examine some possibilities of personal development compatible with an absence of free will. My conclusion here is that God can do quite as much to forward the good of persons in a world in which free will is absent as in one in which it is present. Then, in the paper's second and final section, I argue that certain strides the famous free will defence against the argument from evil may have appeared to make in the absence of awareness of this fact are to be viewed as ill-gotten gains. What careful reflection actually reveals is that the consensus view (that God would decide in favour of free will) is false, and that belief in free will serves the atheist's purposes rather better than the theist's.

1. A world without free will

I propose to begin by going directly to what many would consider the heart of the issue: the question how anyone without free will can enjoy authentic personal relationship with the Divine of a sort that would be valued by a *loving* creator. A common argument here, associated with the work of John Hick,² is that if finite persons lacked free will, their responses to God would be ‘fixed’ in advance, and thus mechanical and lacking in spontaneity. Indeed, the relationship between themselves and God would be like that between a hypnotized patient and the hypnotist, or between a puppet and the puppeteer, or between a robot and its designer – which is to say grounded in one-sided manipulation and control, and so not authentic or truly personal at all. Hick produced this argument in response to an earlier (and in my view somewhat misguided) attempt to support the thesis that God would create persons without free will associated with the names of Antony Flew and J.L. Mackie,³ and most writers these days proceed as though he settled the issue.⁴ There is, in any case, little discussion of alternative positions.

The Hickian argument bears examination, however. It claims, as we have seen, that created persons who lacked free will would be like God’s puppets. But there are puppets and then there are puppets! Take ourselves, for example, the human beings who actually exist. We are persons, and surely this is the case even if we lack free will. The image of a sea of wooden Pinnochios can make us forget that, even if it turned out that we lack free will, we would not suddenly be required to look upon ourselves as less than the psychologically and intellectually complex and ever changing and (potentially) developing social creatures that we are. (There is a very real possibility that we *do* lack free will, and the facts that we have discerned about ourselves in the various sciences are quite compatible with this possibility – indeed, they are often used to defend it.) The mysteries of our nature would, given such a scenario, still be considerable, yielding only to much patient investigation, as would the mysteries of the larger reality of which we are a part. There would still be moments of sudden insight and discovery. We would still be making a living intellectual contact with truths and falsehoods, still struggling with how to be true to what we know and fashion it into a life, still navigating the intricate and subtle highways and byways of interpersonal relationship, still growing or failing to grow toward deeper maturity in various respects. In a world without free will, for example, I might still *decide* to take on certain commitments, *feel* the tension between these and competing concerns, *think* of ways to strengthen the psychological power and efficacy of the former and diminish that of the latter, and so on. Of course perhaps none of us wants it to be the case that nothing we think and feel and decide is in the incompatibilist sense up to us – though why we should see more than a tendency toward

ego-centredness here I'm not sure. But there can be no doubt that we are still amazing creatures with a potentially amazing future even if we lack free will.

This, however (or so it will be claimed), does not yet address the critic's central concern: that in a *Divinely-produced* scenario including persons but no free will, God must *manipulatively control* everything that happens to persons and in persons in a manner incompatible with any kind of authentic personal relationship between them and God. But I would suggest that a fuller development of points already advanced will suffice to deal with this. If we consider the possibilities of an evolutionary picture of the sort suggested by the actual world (but not, of course, restricted to it) – a picture in which, instead of existing complete and whole from the beginning of their careers, created persons are given the opportunity to ever more fully develop the finite psychological, social, spiritual and perhaps physical⁵ capacities they are given in an environment that develops and changes with them as they grow – and use our imaginations when thinking about God and determination, we will find a way of alleviating the critic's concern and gain a better appreciation for what is possible without free will. As we have just seen, such an evolutionary picture does not require free will, and as I will now argue, it can be attractively filled in without depicting God as controlling and manipulating or even as determining every creaturely thought and feeling and choice.

There are several points here. (1) Though it is tempting to assume, as the Hickian argument does, that if in a Divinely-created world persons have no free will, everything about them (including any development they undergo) must be determined by God, 'fixed' in advance, this assumption is false: determination by God does not follow from being created without free will. God may choose to make it the case that not all events – or even all creaturely choices – are determined in advance while not giving anyone free will, for free will notoriously requires more than choices not determined by antecedent conditions outside the agent's control: it entails as well *the agent's control* – a sort of 'agent-causation' consistent with an absence of external determination that, as everyone knows, has proven difficult to provide with an intelligible description, and might well be absent even where such external determination does not obtain. It is not hard to see how in such a world, in which genuine surprises may occur at various levels (perhaps within parameters that *are* predetermined), God would not be in the position of controlling or manipulating everything that happens in and to persons as the evolutionary process unfolds.

(2) But let us assume that such a scenario is for some reason unacceptable. I want to attempt the harder task of showing that a world without free will poses no religious problems even on this assumption. Consider first that even if everything about persons in a world created by God is fully

caused by prior states outside their control, it does not follow that God is right in there tinkering with their psyches every moment of every day as the Hickian argument's use of words like 'manipulate' might lead us to think. In a deterministic scenario, provided with an evolutionary frame, the responses of persons can be seen as part of a process whose laws God has ordained, and as occurring in accordance with those laws, not in accordance with special Divine decrees.

(3) To find further reason to resist the apparent force of the Hickian argument even while accepting the deterministic assumption, notice that at least in the hypnotist example the subject is caused to do what she might otherwise choose to avoid, and may easily be led down delusional pathways that serve purposes other than her own – this is at least part of what gives content to 'manipulation' and 'control' here. But in a deterministic scenario involving God, persons do what it is in their nature to do – there is nothing *they* would rather do if only they had the freedom to do it, and so there is no manipulation of the sort one might associate with the hypnotist example. They are also continually being led into a deeper acquaintance with the truth, and so are progressively, in every way compatible with finitude, *overcoming* delusion and approaching enlightenment on various fronts. This is significant because it alerts us to the fact that in a deterministic evolutionary scenario, properly designed, God does not build into persons a certain limited store of knowledge and then wind them up and watch them do the Divine bidding on the basis of the knowledge given. Rather, God builds into persons capacities that can grow and yield ever richer results – including a capacity to discover ever more of what there is. Persons, in this picture, are constantly learning more of what *God* knows – they are, if aimed at anything, aimed at the truth. Surely it would be a privilege to be 'manipulated' in this way!⁶

(4) The previous point also allows us to see what is wrong with the idea that free will is required for an authentic love and trust in response to God, an oft-repeated refrain in the hymnbook of theistic metaphysics. If we lacked free will and all our responses were determined by God, so we are told, we would be 'pre-programmed', and thus any response of love and trust toward God would be triggered by the program, not by real awareness of how things are – specifically, not by awareness of God's own personal qualities and merits. Implanted desires would be activated instead of ones naturally acquired in response to the facts. But this does not follow, as in effect we have already seen. For if I am programmed to learn the truth, and to form beliefs and desires and purposes appropriate thereto, then I *cannot* respond to the program without responding to the facts. Coming to learn truths about God, individuals in the scenario I have in mind naturally and appropriately respond with an ever deeper love and trust, just as in authentic personal

relationships with each other in the actual world we may respond positively and appropriately to our awareness of facts about the other – for example, to our recognition of a parent's biological relationship to ourselves, his gentle, caring nature, his helpfulness in difficult situations already experienced, and so on.⁷

(5) It may now be objected that despite the refinements I have added, in a deterministic scenario of the sort we are considering God still must *know* everything that will happen to finite persons in a manner quite incompatible with authentic relationship and the uncertainties and vulnerabilities it entails. Later we will see another reason for supposing that this is not a problem, but for now we may simply point out that, having ordained the laws of the developmental process and thus knowing what will happen, God may also *suspend* knowledge of some or all of these laws or of some or all of their consequences. There does not seem to be anything incoherent about this notion. Indeed, it is not unlike a notion of Divine self-limitation already accepted by philosophers of religion, involved where, for example, they speak of God needing to suspend certain powers (or their exercise) in order to permit our free will! Thus it seems that we lack the grounds for speaking of control or manipulation here advanced by the objector.

(6) Perhaps it will be claimed that in my deterministic scenario there remains a lamentable sort of one-sided control, since even if God only ordains the laws of the process and sees to it that they lead us ever further into truth, and even if God suspends knowledge of exactly how the process will unfold, the whole thing has objectively been *set up* to run the way it does, and will inevitably proceed according to Divine decree. The only relationship this makes possible between God and created persons is significantly unlike that existing between individuals in a genuine, personal relationship of mutuality, respect and 'letting be.' But this suggestion only permits us to make a deeper point about any relationship between God and created persons – a point which shows how inapt the analogies we have been considering really are. The force of the hypnotist analogy, for example, depends on the contrast brought to mind there, a contrast between the relationship the hypnotist has to the patient when she determines her responses and the more equal and mutual relationship in which she might participate if she did not do so. But in the religious case the contrast between control given determinism and equality or mutuality given free will must inevitably be severely diminished or disappear altogether. To see this, consider that in any world created by God, even one that includes their free will, the persons we are talking about are *creatures*, and so the relationship between them and God necessarily lacks symmetry in deep and important ways: God creates finite persons, but finite persons do not create God; the potential of finite persons and the number of ways in

which they may pursue it are determined by God, but finite persons do not determine anything like this for God; unless Divine knowledge is suspended, God knows, even if not precisely what finite persons will do, the exact disjunction of possibilities, but finite creatures cannot ever have a similarly comprehensive understanding of what God might do; God (consequently) has or can have ‘contingency plans’ likely to be successful for anything that finite persons do, but finite persons have no such unlimited resources for managing the relationship with God; the appropriate response of persons to God is one that includes worship and adoration, but God owes creatures nothing of the sort; and so on. And the ways in which the relationship lacks symmetry, as should be evident, show that something very like the ‘control’ lamented by the objector is *ineliminable* from a relationship with God and must simply be accepted by finite persons – and indeed become part of the very texture of that relationship insofar as it is properly understood. In a relationship with an infinite being who is the very source of your existence and nature, things will always be ‘set up’ to a large extent and there must always be a rather significant power differential. Even for creatures who have free will, such a relationship can in no possible circumstances be anything like the ‘equal’ and ‘mutually influencing’ and ‘mutually vulnerable’ relationship the hypnotist could choose to have with her patient if she gave up the idea of hypnotizing her.

(7) It may now seem that my points, if correct, prove too much – that *no* authentic personal relationship between finite persons and God is *ever* possible if what I have said is true. But this is not the case. We must simply look for better analogies. Instead of thinking about what is true of meaningful relationships between ourselves and other adult humans when considering what an ‘authentic’ personal relationship with God might involve, we can, for example, look at how as adults we are related to our children and how they are related to us. (This can hardly be seen as a novel suggestion, given well-known and typical patterns of religious discourse about our relation to God.) We are, most obviously, responsible for bringing our children into the world in the first place. And when relating to our small children with a modicum of child psychology in mind, we often know very well what they will do and how they will respond to us and to others in various circumstances, or at least we often know the relevant disjunction of possibilities: when they meet someone new they will be wary or prefer staying close to us, when afraid they will look to us for comfort or run and hide, when hungry they will cry or ask us for food, and so on. None of this prevents us from having an authentic personal relationship with our children appropriate to our different roles and places in the world. This relationship is ideally and indeed typically expressed in the natural disposition of a parent to feed and shelter and clothe and love

and protect and play with and teach the child, and in the natural disposition of the child to receive and participate in all these things, and to share with the parent in a life that is structured by them (notice that for the parent of a small child, there is therefore little of the 'vulnerability' to being rejected that a Hickian will consider essential to personal relationship). And when we think in terms of *this* analogy, we are much less likely to find significant the changes that would go along with a more thoroughgoing parental responsibility for the existence and nature of the child. Suppose, for example, that the child is the result of sophisticated genetic engineering initiated by the parent, and indeed, that the depth of the parent's knowledge of the child's constitution is such that the parent is potentially aware of everything the child will do (including all of its responses to the parent) in future life. Is it not evident that an authentic personal relationship between the parent and child remains possible? (We could, if we wished, suppose that the parent decides not to access much of what she is able to be aware of, but, interestingly, this does not seem to significantly affect which way we come down here.) And is it not evident that this is because the relationship is structured by a sort of *sharing* that is not affected by – and indeed requires – a very different role and place in the world for parent and child? Think of the delight of those times when we experience with our children the usual passages of life (for example, learning how to walk), or help them to see something we ourselves have known for a long time (why the sky is blue, where babies come from, how large is the known universe) – something which, given their curiosity, we realize will interest them and stimulate certain additional questions, often easily predictable in advance. Surely there are some very deeply meaningful and authentic moments of personal relationship here.

(8) All of this suggests a model for understanding authentic personal relationship between creator and created quite different from the conventional one – call it the *sharing* model. (It might not, of course, be a model applicable in the actual world, but that is neither here nor there: we are not trying to make God conform to the world as we know it – or would like it to be – but to conform our understanding to the truth about what a Divine creator would do.) Suppose that morally bad actions and the rejection of God were not options for finite persons – that persons were created good and well-disposed toward their creator within an evolving physical or spiritual universe without evil, which was designed to everlastingly extend the richness of their experience and opportunities for creative endeavour.⁸ Suppose further that God were related to each finite person or to communities of such persons as a parent is related to her children, or – to use a notion functionally similar – in a manner analogous to the relationship existing between a supremely wise teacher and her disciples, and that finite persons were in this way given

the privilege of coming to see and understand and experience ever more fully, through unending time, the amazing wonders of the universe and of its infinitely transcending creator, and to participate in the positive evolution of the universe toward a state that ever more fully reflected the Divinity of its creator. (Thus we might expect work and challenge to be involved, though not such work and challenge as degenerate into suffering. Notice that an ‘unfinished’ universe is not the same as a bad one, just as an unfinished house is not the same as a house poorly built.) What, among many other things, is interesting about persons – for themselves and, we may surmise, for any Divine creator – is their deep capacity for understanding and self-awareness and self-regulation, as well as for creative activity (however determined such capacities and the circumstances of their exercise may be by prior states). This permits growth and insightful, reflective change in response to experience in ways not possible for other creatures, and it does so no matter whether free will is exercised in the process or not, and even if there is no evil. Because of these facts there could be deeply interesting and meaningful interaction between God and finite persons in a scenario of the sort I have described without free will and without evil. In that scenario, perhaps, only God has free will, and creatures have yet another reason to respond in respect and humility to God. In it, God expresses a loving desire to share by creating and nurturing finite persons, and facilitating their development in alignment with the truth. Respecting the precious nature of personal life, God permits it to unfold as it will, governed, perhaps, only by a disposition to become and remain conformed to the truth – a disposition that, in the non-developmental sense appropriate to an infinite and unsurpassably great creator, governs God’s life too. Why should we suppose this scenario to be inferior to one including creaturely free will?

(9) “An interesting scenario”, my critic will say, “and one that sounds a great deal like Heaven! But a relationship involving the creature’s free will, exercised in a hostile world that through heroic effort and, yes, suffering she has the opportunity to tame, and that is ultimately *followed* by Heaven, is better than what you have in mind. In particular, it is better for the creature. Even if an authentic personal relationship with God does not necessitate such a prelude, it is still true that finite creatures receive a much more generous privilege and can potentially attain to a much higher degree of dignity if they are given such freedom and responsibility than otherwise. And surely these are good reasons to suppose that a loving creator would give to at least some creatures free will in a world like ours before giving them a world of the sort you have described.”⁹

How should we respond to this argument? Well, the most generous interpretation of what the critic has to say about generosity and dignity would

have us consider that perhaps God can create beings more dignified, and can exercise more generosity, by creating persons who at first possess free will than otherwise (it is clear that if God creates creatures who never possess free will *they* would not have been benefited had God chosen otherwise, for otherwise *they* would not exist). But results we have already arrived at, carefully considered, together with a simple though generally unnoticed point about the knowledge of God, suggest that this claim is false. As we have already observed, the beings God can create who never possess free will include truly wondrous creatures, who are afforded the marvelous privilege of experiencing a more unfettered conscious awareness and a more constantly unfolding knowledge of the truth about themselves, their environment and their creator from the beginning (and there is therefore a way in which they are privileged and afforded dignity that is denied most humans in the actual world). Here we can also think again about the conclusion we would draw about ourselves should it be discovered that we lack free will. Would we think of ourselves – would we be *right* to think of ourselves – as lacking in the relevant respects in that case? Would we no longer be able to say, if we are religious, that God has made us but a “little lower than the angels”, and has crowned us with “glory and honour” (Psalm 8:5)? Surely not. Surely the birth of a human child and our recognition of its amazing complexity and the potential it must realize as it grows would rightly continue to fill us with awe. (Here someone may interject that, in a scenario of the sort I have sketched, no one would grow *past* the level of childhood – that in such a scenario finite persons would be prevented from ever growing into anything like adulthood in relation to God. But the notion of a ‘child’ that I am using is of course being used metaphorically, and insofar as we are humble, we will perhaps recognize the metaphorical status of a child as appropriate to the vast differences between ourselves and any Divine Maker. We should also recognize that it is quite compatible with all the sorts of development and maturation normally associated with the literal use of the term ‘adult’ – and, indeed, with more than these, for we are thinking of *everlasting* growth in knowledge and in the sophistication of one’s responses thereto.) Now no doubt free will + Heaven would be a great good for anyone who possessed it. But great value is also realized by those who are naturally and spontaneously good and diligent from the start, and whose lives are continually enriched by new and diverse experience and knowledge. It’s just a different kind of goodness. (Note that any assessment of comparative value here must refer to more than just the way in which *choices* are made: in particular, the scenario I have developed must be considered as a total state of affairs in which free will may be absent but many other goods are present. The tendency of writers in the past to focus exclusively on the value of different kinds of choices

and actions has, I think, contributed to their arriving at a false sense of the importance of free will.)

Add to this now the very important point about knowing God, earlier mentioned. What it is important to see here is that if creatures are growing in experience of *God* unendingly, they are ever more fully experiencing and knowing a reality *unsurpassably deep and rich*. And the privilege involved in *any* way of experiencing an everlasting and evergrowing intimacy with a reality unsurpassably deep and rich is *so* great, one wants to say, as to render ridiculously irrelevant whether those experiencing it do so freely or not. Anyone afforded such a privilege will rightly see what most deeply benefits them and dignifies them as bound up *with this privilege*, not with this or that fact of their own nature (except insofar as it moves them more decisively toward God). Indeed, it seems that, while a relationship marked by human free will is one *style* of relationship God might be free to choose, so long as intimacy with God is not excluded by different styles of relationship, the latter could not reasonably be regarded as inferior. (Remember that we're talking about *everlasting, evergrowing* intimacy with *unsurpassable* greatness here.) But then we have an even more forceful reason to infer that the value realizable by creatures without free will would not be surpassed by the value to be associated with free will, a reason which, together with the other points previously adduced, puts that claim altogether beyond doubt.

2. A world without the free will defence

If what I have been arguing is along the right lines, then we must accept certain serious repercussions for the famous free will defence against the argument from evil. Elsewhere I have defended a form of the latter argument, claiming that if the *deepest* good for finite persons is realizable without the permission of horrific suffering – which, given the possibilities of relationship with God just canvassed, seems clearly to be the case – then God would not permit such suffering. Drawing on the free will defence, as developed by Hick, and also, in their own ways, by Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga, someone might attempt a response that runs as follows. “For personal beings to achieve what is truly their deepest good in relationship with God, they must be given free will – that is, it must be to a considerable extent (and in a manner incompatible with determinism) up to them how they develop their lives for good or ill and how they affect the lives and the similar development of others, and it must be to a considerable extent up to them whether they respond in love and trust to God. But then it is always going to be possible that the world God creates includes horrific suffering, because of the regrettable ways in which personal creatures in that world choose to exercise free will

– which is to say that maybe God *cannot* provide just any created beings with what they need to achieve their deepest good without permitting horrific suffering.”

As I show in other writing not yet published, this argument is flawed in part because finite persons can have a lot of deeply significant free will, involving plenty of moral and spiritual responsibility, even in a world in which choices leading to or resulting from horrific suffering are not open to them. Thus, even assuming that such free will does represent a necessary condition of their deepest good, the argument from horrific suffering can be successfully defended against the free will defence. But if my arguments in this essay are correct, then this common and widely accepted assumption can *itself* be questioned, and indeed, can be shown to be false. Free will is *not* a necessary condition of finite persons' deepest good in a world created by God. While there is no doubt that various familiar commodities associated with free will, and a relationship with God mediated by them, might facilitate great things for personal beings, it is also evident that an everlasting and evergrowing relationship with God mediated in any number of other ways – including the way I have sketched above – could hardly be thought inferior. It follows that the free will defence is completely powerless in the face of a properly constructed argument from horrific suffering.

But there is, as it turns out, also a wider and deeper consequence for the free will defence, that must affect even the views of those who do not accept my argument from horrific suffering. For given the obvious risk of serious suffering bound up with letting free will loose in the world, a loving creator would surely not do so unless there were at least some chance that the contribution to value of free will would be greater than the contribution to value of alternative states of affairs involving a smaller risk of evil that God would be capable of producing.¹⁰ Only thus could the additional risk of evil given free will be justified. And as we have learned, this condition cannot be satisfied: the option involving no free will and no evil at all can clearly be instantiated in such a way as to contribute to value fully as much as a state of affairs involving free will (I shall call its tendency to do so a tendency to *counter* the value of free will). It follows that God would *not* countenance free will and that the free will defence cannot even get started as a defence against the atheistic force of serious suffering.

A more formal presentation of this argument may seem desirable. Let 'F' stand for the state of affairs that consists in finite persons possessing and exercising free will. Let 'p' stand for 'God exists'; 'q' for 'F obtains'; 'r' for 'F poses a serious risk of evil'; and 's' for 'There is no option available to God that counters F.' With this in place, the argument may be formalized as follows:

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| (1) | $[(p \ \& \ q) \ \& \ r] \rightarrow s$ | Premiss |
| (2) | $\sim s$ | Premiss |
| (3) | $\sim[(p \ \& \ q) \ \& \ r]$ | 1, 2 MT |
| (4) | $\sim(p \ \& \ q) \vee \sim r$ | 3 DM |
| (5) | r | Premiss |
| (6) | $\sim(p \ \& \ q)$ | 4, 5 DS |
| (7) | $\sim p \vee \sim q$ | 6 DM |

(3) follows from the conjunction of (1) and (2) by *modus tollens*; De Morgan's law applied to (3) yields (4); (4) and (5) together lead to (6) by disjunctive syllogism; and another application of De Morgan's law takes us from (6) to the final conclusion, according to which either God exists or there is free will (but not both).

So the argument has a valid form. But what about the premisses? Can we say anything more in their support? Well, premiss (1) receives support from the very plausible and commonly accepted claim that any good for the sake of which God permits evil must be at least an *equally great good* – one such that the world is at least as good with the evil and this good as it would be with neither.¹¹ To see that it does, notice that if there is a countering option, then God can obtain as much goodness as is potentially realized through F without as much of a risk of evil, and perhaps with none at all. But then if there is such an option, the world in which F obtains along with the attendant risks is *less* good than an alternative world God can actualize, which is to say that F is *not* at least an equally great good. But if F is not at least an equally great good, then, according to the claim we are calling in our support, God will have nothing to do with F and the evil it may involve. Hence (by hypothetical syllogism) if there is a countering option, God will have nothing to do with F and the evil it may involve. But then (by contraposition) if God countenances F and the evil it may involve, there is *no* countering option – which is what premiss (1) says.

So premiss (1) seems plausible enough. What about premisses (2) and (5)? Well, as we have seen, the truth of (2) follows from the various considerations advanced in the previous section of this paper: if what we said there is correct, then there is indeed an option that counters F – namely one in which God adopts the sharing model of personal relationship with finite persons. As we noted, if God does so, a degree of value no less great than that obtainable through any form of free will would be realized in the lives of finite persons created by God, and without evil of any sort. But why focus on finite persons in this way? Am I illegitimately assuming that the only value-related difference made by free will is one involving such persons? To answer this we may observe that free will defenders have always claimed that the value of

the free will they emphasize resides in its contribution to the value of finite persons' lives and to the possibility of a valuable sort of relationship between themselves and any God there may be,¹² and observe also the plausibility of their claim. Notice that it can be interpreted as a large (and inclusive) disjunctive claim: the value in question need not be viewed as restricted to those who suffer on account of free will or to persons who have free will or even to persons on our planet! What the claim says is that free will has value if and only if *someone or other* is made better or benefited by it. And in this form it does seem to be an unexceptionable claim.

All that remains, then, is to defend the truth of premiss (5) – and this is not a difficult task. For giving finite persons free will must *always* carry with it a serious risk. Indeed, philosophers who defend the free will defence will admit that the risk in question has obviously been turned into a most disturbing reality in the actual world. Premiss (5) is therefore true – in which case our argument is not just valid but sound.

This yields some rather interesting results, with which I conclude. First, the consensus view mentioned at the beginning of this paper, *viz.* that a God who created persons would give (at least some of) them free will, ought to lose that status, for it appears to be false. But we can go further. For most of us believe that free will obtains. But if so, then we are vulnerable to a simple disjunctive syllogism involving this proposition and the conclusion, (7), of our argument above, which generates the further conclusion that God does not exist. And thus we see how open-minded reflection on free will, far from leading to an impressive defence of theism, simply suggests another reason for denying that it is true.

Notes

1. I refer here to *incompatibilist* free will. An action's being a result of the exercise of free will in this sense is incompatible with its being determined by prior conditions outside the agent's control. I shall assume, with the rest of philosophy of religion, that the free will in question is *morally significant* free will, free will that permits choices having a significant impact on how the world goes (though not necessarily as deep and troubling an impact as it appears that free will in the actual world has had – this so as not to exclude those, part of the consensus, who say God would give finite persons free will but also restrict it in some way that is not actually realized).
2. See his *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985), pp. 271–275. Hick (p. 266) goes so far as to suggest that individuals without free will cannot really be persons at all, but (in part, no doubt, on the basis of such considerations as I advance immediately below) few would follow him in this, and I have ignored this suggestion in my characterization of the argument.
3. See Antony Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, eds. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: S.C.M. Press,

Ltd., 1955), and J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955). A defect of the Flew and Mackie approach, as I see it, is that it seeks to meet the theist on her own playing field – where an emphasis on *some* sort of freedom and on moral character is a prerequisite of participation – instead of inviting the theist into another ball park altogether, from which a variety of goods that take us beyond moral character and do not require free will may become visible.

4. See, for example, Robert M. Adams, "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1985), p. 228.
5. I say 'perhaps' to underline the fact that an omnipotent and non-physical God would presumably not be *restricted* to physical options when thinking about what sort of world finite persons should inhabit.
6. An anonymous referee responds to the argument of this paragraph by saying that while the agent may not be caused to do what she might otherwise choose to avoid, it is still the case that she "is caused by factors over which she has no control to have the nature she has and to want to do the things she does", and that this point – perhaps the central point Hick and others are trying to make – may have force even if the hypnotist example isn't quite right. I reply as follows. The hypnotist example is commonly used and commonly taken as forceful and so needs to be exposed as inadequate by anyone with my argumentative aims. That is what this paragraph was about. And the more general 'control' issue that remains when this is done is directly addressed in points 6 through 9 below. Here I would add that if persons being caused by factors over which they have no control to have the nature they have and to want to do the things they do is a problem, *then even a scenario including human free will must be problematic*, since agents whose nature it is to be free, if created by God, are also 'caused by factors over which they have no control to have the nature they have', and they no more choose their wants than do those who are unfree. Nor, we might add, is the *range* of their freedom chosen by them. Notice that free creatures might well wish to rid themselves of their freedom (or of the sort of freedom they possess) but without being able to do so, if it is written into their natures. Freedom, too, in a certain sense, constrains. Indeed, as the points below bring out more fully, a lopsided, asymmetrical relation between creator and created in which the former has much 'control' over the latter is quite unavoidable.
7. This point seems to be missed by, among others, Richard Swinburne in his recent *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 195.
8. Many have argued that, if there were a God, there would be *less* free will and *less* evil. But it is hard to be clear when discussing such scenarios – where should we draw the line? It will be interesting instead to reconsider the merits of a world without any free will and without any evil at all, and apply the results of *this* discussion to the problem of evil.
9. See, for example, Swinburne, *Providence, passim*.
10. My term 'serious' in this sentence should be taken as indicating a category of sufferings broader than that named by 'horrific' – the category of sufferings, let us say, that in some way significantly interfere with the proper functioning of the sufferer in everyday life.
11. It is interesting how philosophers of religion repeatedly use such notions without sensing any obligation to consider in any detail how things might be otherwise, that is, to explore the huge disjunction of possibilities compatible with the absence of the various goods they emphasize and the associated evils. This essay represents the beginning of an attempt to discharge that obligation.
12. And here we must of course assume that such relationship does not make *God's* life better than it would otherwise be. But this seems to follow from God being by God's very nature

unsurpassably great, and from the generally accepted idea that if God creates, it is through an *overflowing* of goodness and not in order to get any Divine *needs* met. (Even if this were not accepted, we would, in order to meet the needs of our argument, only have to say that God's life is as improved by a sharing sort of relationship with finite persons as by one involving their free will; and it is not hard to see how such a claim might be defended.)

