

ON THE DOING-ALLOWING DISTINCTION AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A

REPLY TO DANIEL LIM

Abstract

In his article ‘Doing, allowing, and the problem of evil’ recently published in this journal, Daniel Lim attempts to undermine the following claims with respect to God: (i) the doing-allowing distinction exists and (ii) the doing-allowing distinction is morally significant.

I argue that Lim’s attempt is unsuccessful, and that his understanding of divine providence has the unacceptable consequence of implying that God is the originator of evil.

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In his article ‘Doing, allowing, and the problem of evil’ recently published in this journal,<sup>1</sup> Daniel Lim observes that ‘the so-called Problem of Evil (PoE) is seen by many to be the most formidable problem for theistic belief.’(p.2). He notes that many people hold the following assumption:

‘ASSUMPTION: The only way to defend theistic belief given the PoE is to assume God does not actively bring about everything that happens. God merely allows some things, in particular evil, to happen’ (p.4).

Lim explains that this assumption is at odds with a view which he labels as ‘PROVIDENCE’:

‘PROVIDENCE: God actively brings about everything that happens in the world’ (p.2).

He argues that ASSUMPTION depends on two claims: (i) the doing-allowing distinction exists and (ii) the doing-allowing distinction is morally significant.<sup>2</sup> In the rest of his paper he attempts to undermine both of these claims. He concludes that broadly Kantian

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<sup>2</sup> Lim refers to the overview of the current literature on the doing-allowing distinction and its moral status in Woollard (2012a, 2012b).

considerations (persons must always be treated as ends- in-themselves), when applied to God, effectively dissolve the moral significance of the doing-allowing distinction.

I appreciate the originality and intention of Lim's approach. However, I don't think that the moral significance of the doing-allowing distinction can be dissolved when addressing the problem of evil.

The first few paragraphs of the article are problematic. The first sentence states that 'There is a venerable thesis found in many monotheistic traditions that claims everything that happens in the world is a result of divine providence' (p.1). However, this sentence is ambiguous. 'Divine providence' can be understood as

(1) 'God actively bringing about everything that happens in the world,' as Lim goes on to state.

'Divine providence' can also be understood as

(2) 'God actively bringing about certain events in the world, while for other events God places agents who are free in a libertarian sense<sup>3</sup> in circumstances in which He knew they would freely and actively choose certain courses of actions, and God allows them to do that, thus bringing about these events in accordance with His plan.'

Let's call (2) the 'Middle Knowledge' account of divine providence.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of Middle Knowledge was classically proposed by Luis de Molina (1535–1600), a Spanish

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<sup>3</sup>Libertarian freedom holds that a person is in some sense the 'first cause' of his/her free decisions and that he/she could have chosen otherwise. This is different from a compatibilist's understanding of free will, which holds that a person's decision is ultimately determined by prior circumstances, given which he/she could not have chosen otherwise. See Clarke and Capes (2015).

<sup>4</sup>The Middle Knowledge perspective is not the only alternative. As a reviewer for this journal points out, there are three standard ways theists conceptualize the relationship between divine control and human freedom, with Free Will theism having three important variants differing with respect to God's knowledge:

- a. Theological Determinism (Lim's understanding of PROVIDENCE).
- b. Free Will Theism: God could be all controlling. But to the extent that God grants humans meaningful freedom, God has voluntarily given up control over what will occur.
  - b1. Open Theism: God knows all that has occurred and is occurring and can predict (but does not know) what people will freely do.
  - b2. Simple Foreknowledge: God knows all that has occurred, is occurring, and will actually occur.
  - b3. Middle Knowledge: In addition to knowing all that has occurred, is occurring, and will actually occur, God also knows exactly what would occur given every possible situation.
- c. Process Theism: God cannot unilaterally control anything. All entities always retain some power of self-

Jesuit theologian and the author of the *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis* (1588).

According to this doctrine, God knows what any particular person would freely do in any circumstance. As Molina explains, Middle Knowledge is that

‘by which, in virtue of the most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each faculty of free choice, He saw in His own essence what each such faculty would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or in that or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things - even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite’ (Molina and Freddoso 1988, Qu.14, Art.13, Disp.52, No.9).

This knowledge is ‘middle’ in the sense that it is conceptually between God’s natural knowledge (i.e. knowledge of all possibilities, including what any free creature *could* do in any set of circumstances) and God’s free knowledge (God’s knowledge of what are in fact true states of affairs in the actual world). According to Molina, God freely decreed to actualize a world known by him to be realisable on the basis of his Middle Knowledge (Craig and Moreland 2003, chapter 28).

With regards to a person’s response to God, the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account would hold that God’s enabling grace is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. As Molina puts it,

The assistance through which we are helped by God toward justification is not efficacious intrinsically and by its nature; rather, its being efficacious depends on the free consent of the faculty of choice, a consent that the will is able not to give despite that assistance - indeed, when it consents, it is able to dissent (Molina and Freddoso 1988, Qu.14, Art.13, Disp.53, Part 2, No.30).

Hence, in Molina’s account, a limited<sup>5</sup> libertarian human freedom is included within God’s providential will. On this ‘Middle Knowledge’ understanding, it is not the case that

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determination. Nevertheless, God is at every moment attempting to persuade all entities to choose the best available option.

<sup>5</sup> It is limited, because there are many other events (e.g. the time and place at which an individual is born) which are beyond the ability of an individual to freely decide.

‘God actively brings about everything that happens in the world.’ Rather, some events are not actively brought about by God, but by free agents, and God allows them to make the choices and carry out their free actions. By virtue of placing free agents in circumstances in accordance with His Middle Knowledge of how they would freely act, God is able to guarantee that events come to pass in accordance with His providential will.<sup>6</sup>

The ‘Middle Knowledge’ account of divine providence, therefore, is different from (1). Unlike (1), the ‘Middle Knowledge’ account of divine providence is compatible with ASSUMPTION. As I shall explain further below, (1) has the unacceptable consequence of implying that God actively brings about acts of evil that are present in this world. It is doubtful that this is ‘a venerable thesis found in many monotheistic traditions.’ However, (1) is the understanding Lim adopts; he labels the view that ‘God actively brings about everything that happens in the world’ as PROVIDENCE. This glosses over the fact that many theologians (e.g. those who affirm the Middle Knowledge view) who do not think that ‘God actively brings about everything’ would also use the word ‘providence’ to describe God’s guidance of the events of this world. Lim claims that the view which he labels as PROVIDENCE ‘seems to enjoy strong support from the sacred texts embedded in the various monotheistic traditions’ (p.2). However, the Biblical texts which seem to support this view can have plausible alternative interpretations; on the other hand, there are Biblical texts which are arguably inconsistent with this view (see Loke 2013).

Lim discusses the following cases concerning Smith and Jones (p.5):

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<sup>6</sup> By saying that ‘God is able to guarantee that events come to pass in accordance with His providential will,’ I do not imply that all the events actualized are exactly what God desires (this is what Lim’s theological deterministic account of PROVIDENCE would imply). As the reviewer for this journal highlighted to me, on the Middle Knowledge account, there may well be many aspects of this world (the world God has chosen to actualize)—such as morally evil free actions—that are undesirable by-products of the world which God regarded as the best overall creative option, a world which contains creatures who are free in a libertarian sense. The counterfactuals of freedom of which the God of Middle Knowledge was aware prior to creation and utilized in creating the actual world of God’s choice are not themselves in any way subject to divine control. God simply knew what humans would do (and not do) if granted freedom in a given context. What this means is that God’s ability to create a world that contains what he would have it contain is restricted by the true counterfactuals that are available. Nevertheless, proponents of Middle Knowledge account would say that the granting of freedom to humans is in accordance with God’s providential will (see further, Loke 2013).

SMITH: Smith's young cousin is taking a bath. Smith holds the child underwater and the child dies.

JONES: Jones's young cousin is taking a bath. Jones sees the child slip, hit his head, and fall face down in the water. Though Jones could easily lift the child out of the water, Jones watches the child drown. The child dies.

Lim goes on to question whether there is a plausible analysis of the doing-allowing distinction and whether this analysis can be maintained when applied to God, and he rejects various analyses. One of the analyses of the doing-allowing distinction which Lim considers is via causation. He describes this view as follows: 'If an agent causes a given result then the agent's behavior counts as an instance of doing. If an agent does not cause a given result (and fails to prevent it from occurring) then the agent's behavior counts as an instance of allowing' (p.9).

He objects that 'The most pressing issue facing this approach is the difficulty of pinning down a serviceable analysis of causation,' and he notes that 'there is no consensus in this area of philosophy' (p.9).

In reply, it is true that at present there is little agreement among philosophers concerning whether causation should be analyzed in terms of instantiation of regularities or laws or counterfactual dependence, or manipulability, probabilities or networks or INUS (insufficient but necessary parts of unnecessary but sufficient conditions) or transfers of conserved quantities or dispositions or whether causation should be treated as a theoretical primitive.<sup>7</sup> However, this lack of consensus does not imply that causation does not exist, nor does it imply that no distinction between doing and allowing can be drawn. One way of drawing the distinction would be to utilize the theory of agent causation, according to which a

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<sup>7</sup> For a survey of these different analyses, see Beebe, Hitchcock, and Menzies eds. (2009). They noted a number of reasons for the lack of agreement among philosophers, such as a vast range of theories and counterexamples, the fact that philosophical theories of causation are hostage to developments in the sciences, the concept of causation is used in many different contexts, and the fact that one's choice of theory of causation can have radical consequences for other areas of philosophy (ibid., 1-2).

free agent is the originator of his/her free actions (Clarke and Capes 2015, Section 3).<sup>8</sup> Thus, if an agent is the originator of a series of events leading to a given result, then the agent's behavior in bringing about the result counts as an instance of doing. If an agent is not the originator of a series of events leading to a given result (and does not prevent it from occurring), then the agent's behavior counts as an instance of allowing. In the scenario which Lim goes on to mention, viz. 'The houseplant dies because the owner fails to water it over the holidays' (p.9), the owner is not the source of the series of events leading to the houseplant's death, and thus this does not count as an act of doing but of allowing.

In the rest of his article, Lim discusses a few cases and concludes that

'All that really seems to matter when making moral evaluations of divine behavior is not the doing-allowing distinction, but the Kantian distinction. Morally speaking, we need not worry whether God does something or merely allows it, what really matters is whether or not God treats a person only as means to a further end' (p.14).

One of the cases Lim discusses is as follows

'Ray is a dentist who has a son, Timothy, who has tooth decay. Ray decides to perform a routine dental procedure on him that he knows will be painful. That is, Ray decides to perform a procedure that will harm his son. Nevertheless Ray goes through with the procedure and his son is forced to endure pain. This is an example of doing harm, performing a painful dental procedure, by which Ray does not treat his son only as a means to a further end' (p.14).

I agree that 'broadly Kantian considerations' are important and that it may be the only morally significant consideration in certain cases. However, 'broadly Kantian considerations'

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<sup>8</sup> While the theory of agent causation is controversial, it has been defended in recent literature (see the survey in Clarke and Capes 2015). In the dialectic concerning the argument against the existence of God from evil, the burden of proof would be on the atheist to rule out these defences if he/she were to object to the theist's use of this theory in response to the argument from evil.

by themselves are clearly insufficient for addressing the problem of evil as a whole, which involves other kinds of cases.

In particular, we need to consider the kind of cases which involve the origination of evil intentions and actions. Here we need to distinguish between what an agent wills (intention), the inherent value of the outcome which the will of the agent brings about, and the instrumental value of the outcome which is brought about in what God sees as the best overall plan for this world. There is a clear distinction between a person's intention for bringing about a state of affairs and the value of the outcome—for example, a person can intend evil but bring about good, or vice versa. There is a clear distinction between the inherent value of a state of affairs brought about by human choice – for example, whether the state of affairs is inherently good or evil—and its instrumental value – for example, whether an inherently evil or an inherently good state of affairs is a necessary condition for a greater good or not.<sup>9</sup>

Consider Lim's understanding of PROVIDENCE as 'God actively brings about everything that happens in the world.' On this understanding, God actively brings about every evil intention and action, including the evil intentions and actions of SMITH and JONES. This would imply that God is the originator of evil.

Given Lim's view that what really matters are the 'broadly Kantian considerations', I suppose he would say that it is morally insignificant that God originates and does evil, as long as God has the good intention of treating persons as ends-in-themselves. But it is clearly problematic to say that God is the source of evil and that He does evil. It would imply that there is evil within the being of God, which violates the doctrine of God as a Perfect Being.

It is also contrary to 'the sacred texts embedded in the various monotheistic traditions' (p.2) which Lim appeals to in his article; for example, it is contrary to Psalm 145:17 'The

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<sup>9</sup> I thank the reviewer for this journal for mentioning these distinctions.

LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that this verse does not imply that God will not inflict any suffering. Consider the case of Timothy getting a dental procedure for his tooth decay. Although the dental procedure causes pain and suffering, the intention is to treat the teeth, and what it achieves is good. One might therefore argue that the moral evaluation of such instances of suffering should not be done by considering the suffering in and of itself. Rather one has to take into consideration what suffering achieves, i.e. the instrumental value of the suffering. Thus the affirmation that God is righteous and kind in all His deeds does not imply that He would not inflict suffering. However, the moral evaluation of intention is another matter. The intention of someone wanting to torture a child for fun is evil, regardless of the outcome. Thus the affirmation that God is righteous and kind in all His deeds does imply that He would not actively bring about intentions and actions that are morally evil, such as (say) Smith torturing a child for fun, or someone hating God.<sup>11</sup> The only way to avoid the conclusion that God is the originator of evil is to give up Lim's view of PROVIDENCE<sup>12</sup>, to embrace an alternative view of divine providence and to defend ASSUMPTION.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>10</sup> One might object by quoting Isaiah 45:7 (KJV), which states 'I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.' However, in this verse 'create evil' can be translated as 'creating calamity' (NASB). As explained in the text, the affirmation that God is righteous and kind in all His deeds does not imply that He would not inflict suffering.

<sup>11</sup> One might ask, 'What about Scriptural texts which say that God hardens the hearts of people, such as Pharaoh?' In reply, it should be noted that, while there are a number of passages in Exodus which mention that God hardens Pharaoh's heart (7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4,8), there are other passages (Exodus 8:15,32; 9:34) which mention Pharaoh hardening his own heart, that he refused to humble himself (10:3) and was stubborn (13:15). 1 Samuel 6:6 rebukes the Philistines for hardening their heart like Pharaoh, and indicates the responsibility of humans in the hardening of hearts. Divine hardening can be understood as God allowing those who harden their own hearts to remain hardened.

<sup>12</sup> The reviewer for this journal points out that, on Free Will Theism, God can and does occasionally unilaterally intervene to override a person's free choice. In those cases, the God of Free Will Theism is very much like the God of Theological Determinism: God actively brings it about that the person does what God determines is best (the good) in that situation. However, when the God of Free Will Theism permits humans to exercise free choice, then God's relationship to good and evil outcomes is in a very important sense symmetric. If the decision is truly free, then God must by definition equally allow any choice actually made, whether it be good or evil. And this important form of passive symmetry in God's relationship to good and evil is not found in Theological Determinism.



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