

This is a response to Richard M. Gale's review of my book *God, the Best, and Evil*, Clarendon Press 2008. The review was published on-line in May 2009, in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Gale and I have engaged in correspondence arising from an earlier version of these remarks, which I sent to him in the form of a letter. I thank him for useful insights.

1. 'God'

I argued that we should not regard omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, or bringing the universe into existence as built in to the meaning of the word 'God,' and that we should not attempt to define 'God' in terms of logically necessary and sufficient conditions for its application. Instead, I said that for a great many purposes we will successfully explain what we are talking about when using 'God' by saying that God is the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very good. My idea was that many hearers would want to say 'Yes, that description uniquely picks out the being we have in mind, and lists features which are central to our understanding of God, even though there is a lot more that we would want to add, e.g., that God is omnipotent, triune, etc.' Given that there is disagreement about just what more should be added, such a minimalist explanation has its advantages.

I did not subsequently renege on the foregoing semantic account. I did, however, point out that the explanation also has some disadvantages. In the last paragraph of Section 1.3 I dealt with these disadvantages by stipulating that from then on in my book the assertion that God exists, understood in the foregoing way, was to be regarded as accompanied by a latent statement to the effect that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc. (For it is the proposition that God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, etc, that is the focus of the book.) I did not first state my intention to use the word 'God' in one way and two pages later announce a contrary intention.

Nevertheless, if a reader as astute as Gale found my exposition confusing then I wish that I had expressed myself more clearly.

2. Definitions of 'omnipotent' and 'omniscient'

Gale declares that my account of omnipotence and omniscience in terms of God's intrinsic causal capacities and cognitive powers allows for a God who can do and know very little because he is not given suitable opportunities to exercise these capacities. To see that this is not so, consider how there could be limitations on God's opportunities which did not involve limitations on his intrinsic causal capacities and cognitive powers. Molinists and open theists hold that God cannot causally determine free choices and actions. Open theists infer that God's bringing free creatures into existence suffices to yield limitations on his opportunities to act. Although theological determinists and Molinists typically think that God never in fact has limited opportunities to act, I argued in my book that they should agree that there are possible worlds in which God finds himself in this position.

Since *God, the Best, and Evil* assumes that if God exists (and is omnipotent, omniscient etc) then either theological determinism or Molinism or open theism is true, it is plain that, contrary to Gale's assertion, in formulating my definitions of omnipotence and

omniscience I have not made the task of giving a theodicy too easy. I have not left it open to theodacists to ‘say about any extant evil that God has the causal and cognitive powers to have prevented it but, unfortunately, did not have the opportunity to do so.’ For example, nothing that I have said provides, or purports to provide, any reason to suppose that there are cases in which God does not have the opportunity to prevent some natural evil, or some instance of suffering which is caused by a free human choice. After all, even if God cannot know, infallibly, in advance what the free human choice will be, he can often have a high degree of confidence, falling short of certainty, about what it will be; and after that choice has been made he can know, infallibly, outcomes determined jointly by it and other states of the universe.

3. Molinism

Gale claims that my definition of *weakly actualize* ‘has the unwanted consequence that when God creates a person and makes her free with respect to an action x, he does not weakly actualize her doing x, since, obviously, she actualizes action x by intentionally performing it.’ Here Gale must be assuming that humans’ weakly actualizing their actions would exclude God’s weakly actualizing them as well. But this is not so, given my definition of ‘weakly actualize’. No doubt Gale was led astray on this second point by his having misread my definition of ‘weakly actualize’: when he quotes it, he omits the word ‘strongly’ before the second occurrence of ‘actualizes.’

Gale raises an objection to Molinism which he thinks I should have considered. But *God, the Best, and Evil* does not rely on the truth of Molinism. I felt free to refrain from considering objections to Molinism, since as Gale himself points out the book is neutral between theological determinism, Molinism and open theism. (Indeed, I do not, in the book, assert or imply that God exists.)

4. Theistic scepticism

The sentence Gale quotes from my page 205 is preceded by the words ‘But suppose that we were entitled to believe: ...’ I was arguing that Rowe’s 1986 paper covertly appeals to the premise *It is more probable than not that for each instance of human or animal suffering there is no greater good such that even God could not have obtained the good without allowing that instance, or some other evil at least as bad.* The point of doing so was to establish that Rowe’s 1986 reasoning could not legitimately be used to support Rowe’s estimate in his 1996 paper that $\text{Pr}(G/k) = 0.2$, seeing that k should not include any premise similar to the italicized one. My argument did not depend on any premise constituted by the words Gale quotes from p.205, and therefore did not depend on what Gale calls theistic scepticism. So Gale’s charge that what I said is ‘much too quick and glib’ misses the mark.

The next sentence Gale quotes occurs not on p.226 (as he says), but instead on p.221. It forms part of my exposition of J.L. Schellenberg’s main line of argument in his 2000 paper. The sentence is put into the mouth of an imaginary objector to earlier stages of Schellenberg’s argument, and is followed immediately by the response that Schellenberg would make. It is not a premise of any argument that I myself am advancing.

The closest I get in the book to anything deserving the name ‘theistic skepticism’ is a fair distance away. The relevant passages occur in pp.210-215.

5. Open theism and contingent limitations on divine foreknowledge

The main issue concerns whether ‘omniscient’ should be defined as entailing (infallible) foreknowledge of every truth which logically can be (infallibly) foreknown. Section 1.9 of the book argued that it should not. I pointed out that even though the proposition ‘It is logically possible that God foreknows that Jones does A at t’ is true, it might be true that both Jones does A at t and God cannot foreknow that Jones does A at t. Such a situation arises in cases in which Jones’s doing A is causally undetermined. Some philosophers describe such cases by saying that even though the proposition ‘It is logically possible that God foreknows that Jones does A at t’ is true, as a matter of contingent fact God’s not foreknowing that Jones does A at t was always accidentally necessary.

Insofar as this last point is what Gale had in mind when he said, in his review, ‘To be sure it is logically possible that God foreknows that Jones does A at t_7 ; but, if God were to know this *in the actual world* a contradiction would follow,’ I have no reason to disagree with him, since it is compatible with what I said in Section 1.9 of the book.

How should we understand the argument with which the review ends? Plainly (4) is incompatible with (5) -- according to the background assumption that free will and determinism are incompatible – so it is not surprising that Gale can infer the explicitly self-contradictory (7). His final sentence, the one after (8), amounts to one way of expressing the incompatibility of (4) with (5). But how is all this supposed to add up to an objection to the way I stated and argued for my objection to Hasker.

Should we regard Gale’s argument (4) – (8), and the sentence which follows (8), as aiming to show that *God knows that Jones is free with respect to doing or refraining from doing action A freely at time t*, and the assumption that free will and determinism are incompatible, together entail *God does not infallibly foreknow whether Jones will do A at t*? The trouble was that everyone except Molinists agrees with this conclusion. So perhaps, instead, Gale’s argument is an attempt to show that *x is omniscient* should be understood as involving, in every circumstance C in which x finds himself, infallible foreknowledge of the truth of all true propositions P such that *x is in C* is logically compatible with *x infallibly foreknows the truth of P* – where the specifically salient examples are ones in which x is God, circumstances C involve a created agent’s being about to perform a free action, and P is a proposition specifying what the agent will do. Still, Gale would need to argue that the conclusion somehow conflicts with the account of omniscience I proposed in the book. He has not done so.

My overall conclusion is that although Gale repeatedly claims that *God, the Best, and Evil* is defective, his book review has not identified any defects, apart from the fact in a couple of places I should have written more clearly.