

The Dilemma of Theistic Determinism



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Introduction

In the popular tradition of William James's classic "The Dilemma of Determinism" and Sir Karl Popper's "Indeterminism and Human Freedom,"² I offer up the following sound bite as food for philosophical and theological thought.

If determinism is true then either God is evil and the author of evil or all talk of good and evil, of praise and blame, of moral responsibility, and of justice is meaningless and incomprehensible with reference to God. That is, if God can cause or determine evil and yet remain good, and if God can punish those who do exactly and only what He has meticulously caused and determined them to do and yet remain just, then we have no idea who God is or what He might or might not do or what Scripture could possibly mean when it calls Him "good" and "just."

These are strong claims; nevertheless, it seems to me that theistic determinism is committed to the conjunction of several theses that lead to precisely such a dilemma. Note, for example, the following related pairs of statements (reading each pair left to right):

¹These two essays are "must reading" for any informed critique of deterministic systems of thought. The James essay may be found in his oft-reprinted *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897) and is available online at <https://archive.org/details/willtobelieve00jameiala>. The Popper essay may be found as chapter 6 of his *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). My own comments here are a further attempt to capture and articulate, at the popular level, some of our intuitions about a God who is the ultimate and meticulous cause/determiner of *everything, including evil*. Thus, for example, I make no distinction between *causing* and *determining* an act or state of affairs.

When a moral agent who is not God causes/determines another to do evil, then that first moral agent <i>is</i> morally blameworthy and guilty of evil.	When God causes/determines another to do evil, then He <i>is not</i> morally blameworthy and guilty of evil. ²
When a moral agent who is not God causes/determines another to do evil, then that other person <i>is not</i> morally guilty, responsible, or justly worthy of blame or punishment.	When God causes/determines another to do evil, then that other person <i>is</i> morally guilty, responsible, and justly worthy of blame and punishment (up to and including eternal conscious torment in hell).
When a moral agent who is not God judges and condemns another for some terrible evil or crime that the judge Himself caused/determined the other person to commit, then that judge <i>is</i> unjust and morally reprehensible.	When God judges and condemns another for doing exactly and only the terrible evil that He Himself caused/determined the other person to commit, then He <i>is not</i> unjust and morally reprehensible.

Attempts have perennially been made to reduce the intolerable moral dissonance created by these juxtaposed statements and so, perhaps, avoid the horns of the dilemma posed above by claiming: (1) that we are dealing with an impenetrable mystery (impenetrable at least to fallen and/or finite minds); (2) that God's causal connection to evil is buffered or insulated by means of intermediary secondary causes such that He remains untainted by the moral blame and odium that attach to the ultimate evil actions whose existence He both fully intends and guarantees; or (3) that persons can still be morally blameworthy and justly condemned for the evil they were caused/determined to do if they were free from external compulsion and if it was what they wanted and desired to do. These attempts fail to persuade.³

²This is perilously, almost deceptively, abstract. When considering the evil that God causes/determines people to do, what is meant is not only the aggregate sum total of all the evil in the world but also each and every concrete and specific instance of murder, abortion, torture, genocide, rape, child molestation, bestiality, false witness, theft, lust, oppression, bigotry, blasphemy, idolatry, etc. God Himself wills and deliberately and meticulously causes/determines *each and every specific act of evil*.

³There is also, I should add for the sake of completeness, a deterministic attempt to explain the inexplicable by boldly grasping the nettle. God *does* cause/determine evil, but that is somehow "okay" because it is necessary for some otherwise unobtainable greater good. Besides the ethically fatal admission (God is the author of sin) and the implicit presumption of omniscience (there was no other way), this is a complete moral dead end: for it leads either to a docetic view of sin and evil, or to the just condemnation that falls on all those for whom the end justifies the means (Rom 3:8). If Paul in no uncertain terms condemned the Machiavellian misrepresentation of *himself*, how much more worthy of condemnation would he find a similar misrepresentation of *God*? It would thus seem inadvisable to pay God backhanded metaphysical compliments after first having turned him into a devil.

I.

As for the first attempt to avoid the dilemma, it is hardly necessary to say more than that there is a difference between a mystery (antinomy, paradox, etc.) and a contradiction. For here we have what appears to be a fairly obvious and straightforward contradiction (*a being who causes/determines evil is not evil*) or else a mystery so profound and abysmal that it: (1) renders God unknowable and all God-talk equivocal and meaningless; and (2) vitiates our ability to make reasoned moral judgments. With reference to the former point, I simply mean to say that if we do not and cannot understand how causing/determining evil can be *good*, or how punishing those whom one has caused/determined to do evil can be *just*, then we do not and cannot know what it would mean to call a being who does such things *good* or *just*, meaning that we do not and cannot know who God is, much less what He might or might not do at any time in the name of such “goodness” and “justice.”

With reference to the latter point, consider the following moral judgment: *A being who causes/determines evil is evil*. This moral judgment cannot be attributed to human finitude or depravity or sentimentality and then summarily dismissed—for this judgment gives every indication of being self-evidently true. That is, it is a self-evident moral truth that if agent **A** causes/determines agent **B** to do evil, then agent **A** is guilty and morally responsible for that evil and agent **B** is not guilty or morally responsible for that evil. The truth of this seems utterly basic and completely axiomatic and does not obviously change for any finite agent. (How could it?)⁴ But there is no clear logical move, apart from mere question-begging assertion, whereby it can be shown that putting *God* in place of a finite agent changes the truth of this axiom in the slightest. To put it in the form of a syllogism:

A being who causes/determines evil is evil.

The God of theistic determinism is a being who causes/determines evil.

Therefore, the God of theistic determinism is evil.

To deny such a self-evident moral truth is to destroy the very ground of morality and the very basis for reasoned moral judgment. It is, in effect, the *moral* equivalent of denying a self-evident *empirical* truth such as the independent existence of the world of sense experience. (What would it take to convince us of *this*? What would it take to convince us that the objective, external world that we so clearly see, in a mysterious way that defies our most basic intuitions, is actually an illusion?) The cost of this moral mystery—loss of both knowledge of God and the capacity to make reasoned, moral judgments on the basis of our most basic moral intuitions—is simply too great. If, as the logicians tell us, from a contradiction anything follows, then anything would seem to follow *morally* should God and His actions so violently contradict our most basic intuitions—intuitions, I might add, that are fully endorsed and

⁴Is it more (or less?) true for paupers than for kings; for angels than for archangels? Does size really matter to morality?

supported by Scripture itself as it defines, models, commands, and inculcates such important and foundational virtues as goodness and justice, all the while grounding them solidly in the perfectly good and just character of God.

II.

As for the second attempt to avoid the dilemma, it is difficult to conceive of a *fully determining* primary cause that is not at the same time an efficient cause, or a *fully determined* secondary cause that is not at the same time an instrumental cause (i.e., a tool). Likewise, it is equally difficult to conceive of an instrumental cause that is morally responsible and blameworthy for the evil effects it produces, or an efficient cause that is not guilty for the evil effects it produces, *regardless of whether those effects are produced directly or indirectly through any number of intermediate secondary causes*. Did people do precisely and exactly and only the evil that God willed and caused/determined that they do? Could they have done otherwise than what God willed and caused/determined them to do? That is all. For the practical business of praise and blame, secondary and intermediate causes and effects are quite irrelevant irrespective of their number given that each secondary cause is fully determined by what immediately preceded it and fully determines what immediately follows it. It does not matter how complicated the Rube Goldberg device is—or whether the device is Rube Goldberg himself acting in complete accordance with his nature—if the ultimate and final evil outcome was *known, intended, and the only possible outcome*. In a fully determined world, all blame resides with the one who created the Rube Goldberg device and set it (or him) in motion. In a fully determined world, there can only be one sinner.

The consistent theistic determinist obviously cannot appeal to the concept of divine permission to get God off the moral hook,⁵ as if God *passively* allowed things that He did not *actively* cause/determine, though an appeal could perhaps be made to some kind of confluence or concurrence of divine *and* human causation. And while this idea may be helpful in the case of a good outcome, like the inspiration of Scripture, it really does not seem very helpful in reference to outcomes that are wholly wicked, debased, and evil. Does God share a percentage of the blame? Is he partly evil? If God acts causally in every evil act in the same *finally determining and superintending way* that He acted in the case of inspiring the words of Scripture, then we are right back where we started with our earlier and simpler talk of efficient and instrumental causes. God is still not off the hook, or the horn, as the case may be.

And speaking of Scripture, let us not miss the potentially intractable problem that theistic determinism creates on this very point, namely, that it seems to entail the plenary verbal inspiration of *all* human writings. All human writings would appear to be “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) if God is equally causally active everywhere and at all times. Not a jot or tittle

⁵Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.16.8; 1.18.1–2; 2.4.3; 3.23.1; 3.23.8, who variously excoriates the notion of permission as “evasion,” “fiction,” “cavil,” and “superstition.”

anywhere, ever, lies on a page or falls to the ground except by His meticulous causation and determination. One could thus point to *any book* and say, “Here is a book whose contents were decreed and caused and meticulously determined by God to be exactly and only what He wanted said.” And God would then be the author not only of all evil but of all falsehood (wherein may lie another dilemma for another day). This suggests, lest Scripture’s own claim to uniqueness be vitiated, that God is minimally (read *not*) causally active in the writing of, say, *Mein Kampf* or *The Da Vinci Code*, but maximally active in the writing of the Old and New Testaments. The following thought, in other words, seems lacking in cogency: “Of course God causally determines *everything*; but, man, does He ever causally determine the words of Scripture!”

III.

Finally, the third attempt to avoid the dilemma, whether a person did what he or she wanted free from *external* compulsion, is of no obvious help to theistic determinism since that person’s *internal* thoughts and emotions—their wants and desires and brain states—are all fully and completely caused/determined by God Himself. There is *nothing* that God does not determine; and to admit *anything* that God does not determine is to abandon theistic determinism. Moreover, compulsion is compulsion on any normal, non-question-begging meaning of the word, whether it is external or internal, whether by the arm or by the brain state, or whether by the strongest (causally determined) desire of the will. The appeal to wants and desires only puts the problem one small but unhelpful step back; it does not solve the problem. Whether or not a person desired or wanted to do the evil that God caused/determined them to do is thus a red herring as the following thought experiment makes clear:

Imagine that Mr. Hatfield and Mr. McCoy have a longstanding disagreement. We may even call it a feud. And it can be demonstrated by countless witnesses and by looking at Mr. Hatfield’s letters and diaries that he abominates Mr. McCoy and wishes him dead. Nothing would make him happier than the death of Mr. McCoy. He often plots the death of Mr. McCoy in his spare time, thinking up new and creative ways to make Mr. McCoy suffer painfully and die as he looks on mockingly. The feelings are, of course, entirely mutual.

Now imagine that Mr. Hatfield is under anesthesia for some routine surgery. While in this state and unbeknownst to him his doctor, Dr. Strangegood, cleverly implants in his brain a small computer microchip timed to activate itself in seventy-two hours and cause/determine him to strangle Mr. McCoy with his bare hands. Exactly seventy-two hours later, Mr. Hatfield is happily strangling Mr. McCoy to death just as the computer chip was programmed to cause/determine him to do.

Mr. Hatfield is then caught, arrested, convicted of first degree murder, and sentenced to death by lethal injection. (He even admits to killing Mr. McCoy and is “glad” he finally did it.)

The doctor who administers the lethal injection is Dr. Strangegood.

Two people are now dead: Mr. Hatfield and Mr. McCoy. Who is *morally responsible* for their deaths? Who is *guilty* for their deaths?

The answer is simple and inescapable; indeed (I again make so bold as to claim) it is *self-evident*. This suggests that if theistic determinism is true, then God is indeed a moral monster. If theistic determinism is true, then God is the evil doctor writ large, a cosmic Dr. Strangegood. These moral intuitions seem completely sound and unobjectionable. No jury of reasonable people could possibly have condemned Mr. Hatfield to death for the murder of Mr. McCoy had the presence of the microchip and its programming been brought to the jury's attention by the defense. The fact that Mr. Hatfield did what he "desired" to do is quite irrelevant to the specific question of his responsibility and guilt for this particular murder at this particular time. He was at the crucial moment in question merely the tool of another, meticulously and irresistibly acting out the plans and intentions of another. If only made aware of the microchip and its programming *after* the autopsy of Mr. Hatfield, no jury of reasonable people could possibly do otherwise than convict Dr. Strangegood of not one but two utterly heinous, cold-hearted, and diabolical murders.⁶ And what is more, no jury of reasonable people would ever have exonerated Dr. Strangegood of guilt for these murders because he claimed under oath that what he did was "good" in a mysterious way that bore no analogy to the goodness of ordinary people and the way the word good was ordinarily used. We have a word for goodness that bears no analogy to the goodness of ordinary people and the way the word good is ordinarily used; that word is "evil."

Conclusion

To say of anyone that he is good, truly good, is to say that he is kind and merciful and benevolent; that what he does is right, just, fair, and conformable to the Moral Law and the Golden Rule; and that in all that he does he seeks the good of others. To say, as with the Psalmist, that "God is good and does good" (Psa 119:68) is to say all of this and more, for God not only seeks the good of others but their *ultimate* good which, in that He Himself is the *Sum-*

⁶This would hold true whether the microchip caused Mr. Hatfield to do *exactly* what he wanted or whether it gave him an irresistible murderous desire that he did not previously have. Note that for this desire to be irresistible, it need only be an infinitesimal smidgeon—a mere statistically undetectable quantum fluctuation—stronger than Mr. Hatfield's next strongest desire. ("Come now! How much guilt could possibly attach to a smidgeon?" One can almost hear Dr. Strangegood, acting as his own lawyer of course, asking the jury this question.) And it would also hold true whether Dr. Strangegood caused/determined Mr. Hatfield to murder Mr. McCoy by external compulsion, by internal interference via an implanted microchip, by interference at a distance via some new form of radio waves, by voodoo, or by causally efficacious decrees set in motion prior to Mr. Hatfield's birth, provided, of course, that it could be shown that Dr. Strangegood really had the brute strength, the requisite technology, or the supernatural power to perform black magic or enact causally efficacious decrees. I refer those who find such microchips as I have described utterly fantastic and implausible to the May 2005 issue of *Scientific American*, whose cover story was titled "Neuromorphic Chips." For further information see also, e.g.: <http://www.braingate2.org/aboutUs.asp>; <http://www.stanford.edu/group/brainsinsilicon/about.html>; as well as to such imagination-stimulating Wikipedia entries as "brain-computer interface," "cyborg," and "neuroprosthetics."

mum Bonum (Supreme Good), must necessarily be Himself. The ultimate good of all rational creatures is and can be nothing less than the Beatific Vision.

On the other hand, to irresistibly cause/determine people to do evil, to cause/determine people to violate the Moral Law and to offend the Moral Lawgiver, is *not* good. It is not good for anyone. It is not good for God. To not only do this to people but, in addition, to damn those same people to eternal, conscious torment in hell for what He Himself has caused/determined them to do is *very* not good. In fact, it is *supremely* not good. I submit that no possible greater evil is conceivable. No possible greater violation of the Moral Law is conceivable. No possible greater violation of the Golden Rule is conceivable. Is the God who does the most supremely evil thing imaginable—*than which nothing greater can be conceived*—good?⁷ The assertion is utterly stupefying.

It would seem to follow, then, that we should not accept the implausible assertion that the God of theistic determinism is “good.” If true, we would not know what it meant; in which case we could not know it to be true. It is at root a contradictory and self-refuting assertion. Thus, “when we hear of some new attempt to explain *that the God who causes/determines evil is good*, we ought to react as if we were told that someone had squared the circle or proved the square root of 2 to be rational. Only the mildest curiosity is in order—how well has the fallacy been concealed?”⁸

When God commands us to be good and to do good unto others it means, for example, that it is morally wrong—*absolutely and everlastingly morally wrong*—to cause/determine people to do evil or to hold people guilty and punish them for things that they were caused/determined by others to do. Is what is “good” for God, however, completely different, even *opposite*? The very claim is irrational. Why even use the word good? On any reasonable definition of the term good, a God who caused/determined evil and punished those whom He caused/determined to do evil would not be good but rather would be evil and the author of evil. That God is evil and the author of evil is a conclusion not surprisingly rejected by theistic determinists, who are then forced into a “wretched subterfuge” and a “quagmire of evasion”⁹ because deter-

⁷My apologies to Anselm and the *Proslogion*.

⁸Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 52, cited in Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis’s Dangerous Idea: In Defense of the Argument from Reason* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 45. I have taken the liberty of modifying the original wording slightly. The italicized words in my quote above replace the following words in the original: “reasoning or language or choice naturalistically.” Reppert picks up where Lewis’s classic book *Miracles* left off and is one of the most cogent refutations of Naturalism available. All naturalistic theories (and hence all *deterministic* theories) are necessarily self-stultifying since the prior and ultimately external causes of one’s beliefs cannot validate or account for the truth or falsity of those beliefs.

⁹These well-worn but memorable phrases, both in reference to what is called compatibilism, come respectively from Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (Abbot trans., §226) and from William James’s aforementioned “Dilemma of Determinism,” 149, which inspired the title of the present essay even

minism itself so clearly and distinctly demands the very conclusion that they so rightly abhor. Determinism is an acid that corrodes beyond recognition everything it comes into contact with. It destroys all that we ordinarily mean by causation, compulsion, free will, good and evil, justice, moral responsibility, permission, praise and blame, sovereignty, etc. Theistic determinism must be rejected if we are to make any meaningful sense of ourselves, our world, God's Word, and—most importantly—God Himself.

The options are few and simple:

1. Theistic determinism is true and the God who causes/determines evil is evil.
2. Theistic determinism is true and God's mysterious "goodness" (and thus His very nature, character, attributes, and person) is utterly unknowable and incomprehensible to us.
3. Theistic determinism is false and God is indeed good—*unequivocally good*—as the Son of God in his preternatural innocence once said (Matt 19:17; Mark 10:18) on the naïve assumption that what He was affirming would be perfectly obvious to ordinary people everywhere.

while posing a very different dilemma for the determinist. See also Popper, "Indeterminism and Human Freedom," 217, 222, who speaks forcefully of the "nightmare" of determinism; and especially his invaluable full-length treatment of the subject in *The Open Universe: An Argument for Indeterminism* (London: Hutchinson, 1982).