

Determinism

In the context of Christian theology, “determinism” conjures a set of conceptual difficulties for the belief that God is creator of all reality. The traditional claim that God creates from nothing (*ex nihilo*) attributes to God the unsurpassable maximum of power over every created being and worldly event (omnipotence). It is in conceiving the relation between an omnipotent God and the world of our experience that the conceptual difficulties of determinism arise for theology.

Consider the challenge of conceiving free will and moral responsibility if the world is a causally rigid process that prohibits real choice even as it promotes the illusion of choice—we can call this cosmological determinism. Of course, the world probably is not a causally rigid process of this sort. In case it is, there are compatibilist strategies to bolster belief in free will. If these fail, there are still ways of holding ourselves morally accountable for our actions to a degree sufficient for maintaining social order, though these require modifying legal traditions that make moral responsibility dependent on free will. In this last scenario, however, there arises a distinctively theological question. Even if a human judge could justly declare us morally responsible despite there being no free will in either judge or defendant, it is just for God to hold us responsible for our sins? Surely God is not subject to cosmological determinism as the human judge is, and as human sinners are.

A second difficulty also posits cosmological determinism but asks about divine action in such a world. There is no logical difficulty with an omnipotent God overriding the causal regularities of a fully determined creation. But the regularities of the laws of nature presumably express God’s faithfulness and trustworthiness. Coherence of the divine nature seems to demand that God is able to act freely in the world God created without having to abrogate or suspend the divinely established rules by which it operates. But how can God act non-miraculously in a

cosmologically determined world? Theologians exploring divine action in the created order in the modern period have thus typically assumed that cosmological determinism does not hold. They are committed to a theory of divine action that does not *require* miracles even if it *allows* them (e.g. T. Tracy).

A third difficulty arises independently of the question of cosmological determinism. Because theologians have commonly rejected cosmological determinism throughout the history of Christian thought, it is this third difficulty that has been subject to the most extensive theological discussion. It is this: if God is omnipotent creator, then how can anything have authentic freedom? The Westminster Confession of Faith expresses the paradox: “Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” (Chapter 5, “Of Providence”). One version of this theological difficulty imagines divine omnipotence in spatial terms as pervading every part and process of creation, after which there appears to be no ontological room for autonomous existence, let alone freedom. Another version pictures divine power in temporal terms as pervading the future as well as the past and present, making everything transparent to divine knowledge and eliminating the temporal conditions for responsible, free action.

Christian theological traditions manage this twin difficulty in a variety of creative ways. First, the difficulties can be denied outright by rejecting the idea of God as creator and making God part of the world, leaving the ultimate question of origins unanswered. The most systematic approach of this sort is Alfred North Whitehead’s, which inspired the richly developing tradition of process theology. Less systematically developed alternatives appear earlier in the twentieth century within the Chicago School (e.g. H.N. Wieman) and among the Boston Personalists (e.g.

E.S. Brightman). In fact, the idea of a non-creator God has a complex theological heritage running back to Aristotle, who explicitly rejected the idea of a creation (and whose position was explicitly rejected in turn by Aquinas). In all of these variations, God plays a key luring and integrating and valuing role in reality but has neither the decisive power of omnipotence nor the decisive knowledge of omniscience. Thus, the conceptual difficulty of determinism due to these features of the God-world relation dissolves. The corresponding challenges are that the ultimate origin of reality remains unexplained and the ultimate hope for consummation of this world must be radically reinterpreted.

Second, the enormity of divine omnipotence and omniscience can be mitigated by interpreting these features of the God-world relation through the lens of divine love. In this classic approach, God creates the world through love so that every being and every process has autonomy and freedom and an open future suited to its level of complexity. In some versions (e.g. J. Moltmann), God withdraws the divine power in some sense to make room for autonomous creatures. This approach sometimes draws on themes from Jewish Kabbalah in which the glorious divine presence (shekinah) “contracts” to make room for creation (zimzum). It also sometimes draws on the related theme of kenosis (c.f. Phil. 2:5-11), in which God lovingly lays aside divine power in creation, resolving to act within the bounds of respect for the autonomy and freedom of creation. In the most common versions of both zimzum and kenosis (and indeed in Moltmann, who draws on both), God retains ultimate power to consummate the universe. In less common versions such as death-of-God theology (e.g. T. Altizer), God exhausts the divine self into the world in creating, removing the transcendent power to determine worldly affairs and establishing in its place the immanent potency of autonomous creativity. The many variations on

this approach have in common that they take omnipotence and omniscience with sufficient seriousness to create a problem of determinism, which is then answered by love.

Third, divine omnipotence and omniscience can be interpreted so as not to cause any problem of determinism. In some versions of open theism (e.g. R. Swinburne), the spatialized ontology of omnipotence is rejected and omniscience is interpreted in such a way that, somewhat like human beings, God cannot foreknow but can only predict the future. This removes both wings of the difficulty of determinism.

Finally, divine omnipotence and omniscience can be affirmed in the strongest senses, so that everything that happens is just what God determined should happen. In one version of this view (e.g. Augustine), human freedom and responsibility are affirmed but everything still operates according to the divine will. In a stronger version (e.g. J. Calvin), even salvation and damnation are predetermined, which casts doubt on the meaningfulness of human freedom and the justice of holding human beings responsible for sin. All versions of this approach emphasize the divine freedom on principle, preferring to protect that affirmation even at the cost of losing the theoretical means to articulate human freedom. Rather than being a threat, therefore, determinism becomes a wondrous feature of the God-world relation and a cause for worship (as preeminently in J. Edwards).

Augustine, *City of God*; J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; J. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*; J. Moltmann, *God in Creation* (1985); R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (1977).

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