

## **Libertarianism and Theological Determinism**

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Penultimate Version

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### **The Conflict**

According to libertarian views about free will, we human agents have the capacity freely to will actions, and it is crucial to an action's being freely willed that it not be causally determined by factors beyond the agent's control. Theological determinism is the position that God is the sufficient active cause of everything in creation, whether directly or by way of secondary causes such as human agents. Libertarianism and theological determinism are mutually exclusive positions, and so one cannot rationally accept both at once. But each of these positions has features that are valued by traditional monotheistic religions. Most prominently, libertarianism yields a conception of moral responsibility that promises to secure fundamental desert, as well as a widely endorsed response to the problem of evil. Theological determinism offers an uncontroversial route to a strong notion of divine providence. Which of these views is to be preferred?

Libertarianism is well represented among monotheists today, and it has always been widely held among Christians in particular, although perhaps not always with the majority status it enjoys today among conservative to moderate Christians.<sup>1</sup> Why would this be? Robert Kane specifies a number of goods for which free will specified in this way might be necessary:

(1) genuine creativity; (2) autonomy (self-legislation) or self-creation; (3) true desert for one's achievements; (4) moral responsibility in an ultimate sense; (5) being suitable objects of reactive attitudes such as admiration, gratitude, resentment, and indignation; (6) dignity or self-worth; (7) a true sense of individuality or uniqueness as a person; (8) life-hopes requiring an open future; (9) genuine (freely given) love and friendship between persons (or in religious contexts, freely given love toward God); and (10) the ability to say in the fullest sense that one acts of one's own free will.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I argue against the plausibility of our having free will given the libertarian specification in Pereboom 2001 and 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Kane 1996, 80.

The leading monotheistic religions hold that we are created in God's image, and part of what this is often held to entail is that we are creative and autonomous. There are certainly notions of creativity and autonomy that are compatible with determinism, but libertarianism would allow for especially robust versions. It's not so clear that dignity, life hopes, and love and friendship require libertarian free will—I've argued elsewhere that they don't.<sup>3</sup> Among the goods that Kane specifies, the theistic libertarian's focus has rather been on the related notions of desert, ultimate moral responsibility, and being suitable objects of the reactive attitudes. I agree that the truth of libertarianism is required for these notions legitimately to apply to us.<sup>4</sup>

The truth of libertarianism would thus seem necessary for a number of important elements of traditional monotheistic religions.<sup>5</sup> One such element is that the notion of moral responsibility in the basic desert sense applies to us. For an agent to be morally responsible for an action in this sense is for it to be hers in such a way that she would deserve to be blamed if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve

<sup>3</sup> [Pereboom 2001, 2005, and 2014](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Pereboom 2001 and 2014](#).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, [Speak 2004](#) and [Timpe 2013](#).

to be praised if she understood that it was morally exemplary. The desert at issue here is basic in the sense that the agent would deserve to be blamed or praised just because she has performed the action, given an understanding of its moral status, and not, for example, merely by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations. The basic desert notion isn't the only sense of moral responsibility at play in our practice, and this will become important in what follows. But it is a sense clearly invoked by the major monotheisms, in particular in their conceptions of ultimate punishment and reward.

It is difficult to see how the doctrine of eternal damnation, for example, can be justified without invoking this sense of moral responsibility. There are conceptions of postmortem punishment that are forward-looking and do not invoke basic desert, but such views would need to allow for the possibility of release from hell if the forward-looking goals, such as moral reform, are achieved. The common view of hell does not countenance such a possibility, and this view would thus appear to require basic desert in its moral justification. I've agreed that only libertarianism can hope to secure basic desert, and therefore that the truth of libertarianism is required by the doctrine of eternal damnation.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, [Timpe 2013](#), ch. 5.

A second important motivation for accepting libertarianism is that it yields a promising response to the problem of evil. This response involves first of all the claim that God is justified in creating beings that are free in a way that requires that they are not causally determined by factors beyond their control to act as they do. If a being is free in this sense in a decision to perform an action, then, holding fixed the entire history of the universe up to the time of the decision, it is causally possible both that she makes this decision and that she instead refrains from making it. The core idea is that because such freedom is valuable, God is justified in creating beings with this sort of free will. Creating beings with this power does risk introducing moral evil into the world. However, the value of the existence of such free creatures outweighs the risk of their choosing immorally, and, one might propose, this value even outweighs the disvalue of all the bad actions they actually freely perform together with their consequences. In addition, there are further responses to the problem of evil that invoke the will and its freedom. John Hick's soul-building theodicy and Eleonore Stump's will-changing theodicy are examples. In each case, the theodicy invokes salutary changes in character occasioned by one's own suffering or someone else's, and this change is conceived as mediated by a free and voluntary response.

A motivation for endorsing theological determinism is that it provides an uncontested way to secure a strong notion of divine providence, one according to which everything that

happens, including human decisions, is exactly in accord with God's providential will. It would be attractive to retain this notion of divine providence while at the same time accepting a conception of human beings as having free will as specified by the libertarian. This is what Molinism aims to provide. In this view, God can know from eternity what every possible libertarian free creature would choose in every possible circumstance, and with this knowledge, God is able to direct the course of history with precision.<sup>7</sup> But Molinism is a highly controversial position, not least because it is not clear how there could be truths about what non-actual free creatures would freely decide on which God could base decisions as to which to actualize. Truths about what creatures would freely decide would presumably be grounded in what they in fact freely decide, or at least in what they will freely decide, but if they don't exist and never will, such grounding is unavailable. Consequently, those who value an uncontroversial way to secure a strong notion of divine providence have a reason to take theological determinism seriously.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Molina 1988. For a comprehensive exposition and defense of Molina's position, see Thomas Flint 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Pereboom 2005 and 2012.

In a wide range of monotheistic views, the understanding that everything that happens is causally determined by God in accord with a divine plan for the world is held to be a great comfort for us. We find this view expressed in ancient Stoicism, in Islam, and in much of historical Christianity. Human lives are subject to pain, deprivation, failure, and death. How do we cope with these difficulties and the suffering they occasion? Accepting a strong notion of divine providence involves the conviction that everything that happens to us, to the last detail, is in accord with God's providential will. Great comfort in life may be secured by the belief that even minor harms, let alone horrendous evils, cannot befall us unless God, who is perfectly benevolent, wills them to happen. We might ask for a more thorough account of the way in which this conviction might result in such comfort. According to the ancient Stoic position, God determines everything that happens in accord with the good of the entire universe, albeit the nature of this good is incompletely understood on our part.<sup>9</sup> There is an all-encompassing divine plan, and we can be assured that everything that occurs is determined by God with an aim to the realization of that plan, despite our lack of understanding of its nature and means of realization. By identifying with this all-encompassing divine aim, we can be reconciled with the world's evils.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss these issues in [Pereboom 1994](#).

In the Stoic vision, we should align our will and judgment with God's perspective so that we would enjoy equanimity no matter what happens, even if the divine plan conflicts with the good as conceived from one's personal point of view, with one's ordinary human aspirations for personal survival, happiness, and success. Maintaining this attitude requires that we identify with a notion of the good that might well diverge significantly from our personal conceptions of it. One might object that such identification is too demanding given our limited capabilities. Suppose that one's role in the divine plan involves suffering miserably up to a final end to one's existence. As Thomas Nagel remarks, normally 'one is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin.'<sup>10</sup> For many theists the response is to specify that the divine plan not only aims at the good of the whole, but also at the good of the individual. As Marilyn Adams proposes, God is good to every person by insuring each a life in which all suffering contributes to a great good within that very life.<sup>11</sup> Then it might even be, as Alvin Plantinga suggests, that God would know that if I were able to make the

<sup>10</sup> Nagel 1979, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Adams 1999, 55.



decision whether to accept the suffering of my life, and knew enough about the divine plan, and had the right affections, I myself would accept that suffering.<sup>12</sup>

In my view, the value of such a strong notion of divine providence significantly outweighs the value of libertarian free will. I will argue for this claim by, first, arguing that basic desert moral responsibility is dispensable in the moral scheme, and that free will in the sense that the libertarian has in mind has little or no force in providing a theistic response to the problem of evil.

### **Theistic Morality without Basic Desert**

A prominent trend in the Augustinian strain of Christianity maintains a strong doctrine of divine providence underwritten by theological determinism. According to this tradition, human beings are at the same time morally responsible for their sinful actions, and they deserve punishment—even eternal damnation—by virtue of having acted sinfully. Together, these doctrines recommend a compatibilist view of the relation between moral responsibility and theological determinism.

<sup>12</sup> [Plantinga 2004](#).

A long-standing objection to such a position is that it would have God be the author of sin, since our sinful intentions, decisions, and actions would be caused by God. From Molina and Arminius on, the most common avenue of response has been to adopt instead a libertarian view of free will. But another option, typically only hinted at, is to endorse theological hard determinism, according to which theological determinism is true, but as a result we are not morally responsible in the basic desert sense for our actions.<sup>13</sup> In such a view, God is the cause of our wrongdoing, but since we are not blameworthy for our actions, God is not the cause of actions for which we are blameworthy in the basic desert sense. This removes at least some of the sting of the charge that God is the author of sin (more on this issue later).

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Friedrich Schleiermacher had theological determinist views, at least early in his career. I was made aware of this possibility by Andrew Dole's 'Schleiermacher's Early Essay on Freedom', a paper he presented at a conference of the Society for Christian Philosophers in Bloomington, Indiana, in September 2002. The manuscript version of Schleiermacher's essay has no title. It was originally published in excerpted form in Diltney 1983. It appears as Über die Freiheit, which has been translated into English as On Freedom (Schleiermacher 1992).

More generally, on any incompatibilist view theological determinism is incompatible with the free will required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense. I've proposed a position in which theological determinism is true and we are not morally responsible in this sense (Pereboom 2005, 2012). On this view, God's causing our immoral intentions and actions is more similar to causing natural evils, such as earthquakes and diseases, than it is on a view according to which we are blameworthy in the basic desert sense. As a result, the concern that God is the author of sin is closer to a problem that all traditional theists face, i.e. how God can cause or allow natural evil. Timothy O'Connor (Chapter 7, this volume) argues that there is a significant cost to this conception, for the reason that it would have God actively causing the worst human decisions, while this is avoided on the Molinist view, for example. This is indeed extremely difficult to accept. But it's not clear how much better things are for the Molinist. Given Molinism, God chooses to create certain free creatures in full knowledge of the evil decisions they will make, and at least prima facie partly because they will make these decisions. One option for the libertarian is to advocate Open Theism, according to which providence is weaker than Molinism would have it.<sup>14</sup> Like a grand chess master, God might respond to the contingencies of human freely willed immoral decisions

<sup>14</sup> See Hasker 2004.

with maximal resourcefulness and intelligence. But even on the Open Theist view, God allows horrendously evil actions to occur when in most cases he could have prevented them, and he could always have prevented their evil consequences. In such cases, the moral difference between causing such decisions and consequences and allowing them seems negligible, even if more generally it turns out that there is a moral difference between doing and allowing. To cite one standard contrast, Agent A causes a child to drown in a fountain, while Agent B sees the child drowning and does not come to her aid, despite the fact that the effort of doing so is free of cost to him. Given theological determinism, with respect to evil consequences of actions God is like Agent A, and given Open Theism, he is like Agent B, but between the two there would seem to be at most a negligible moral difference.

But does denying moral responsibility in the basic desert sense incur significant costs for monotheistic religion? Let us begin by considering whether the theological determinist can retain notions of blame and praise, supposing that blameworthiness and praiseworthiness in the basic desert-entailing sense are relinquished. A theological determinist with this profile rejects the legitimacy of any blaming and praising practice that presupposes that the agent being blamed or praised is morally responsible in the basic

desert sense, or is an appropriate target of basic desert-entailing reactive attitudes. But there are other notions invoked in our practice available to her.

The hard determinist Joseph Priestley<sup>15</sup> and his revisionary compatibilist cousins such as J. J. C. Smart<sup>16</sup> contend that there are largely forward-looking notions of blame and praise that are immune to the threat of causal determination. On the sort of position they propose, the aim and justification of the practice of blaming and praising is to diminish dispositions to immoral behavior and to strengthen dispositions to moral action. Blaming typically addresses misconduct as a means to weakening a standing disposition to act badly, and praising typically addresses exemplary action in order to strengthen dispositions apt to produce it. Contrary to one widespread criticism, such a view need not recommend treating agents as mere stimulus–response mechanisms. Thus when someone has behaved badly, one might ask him: ‘Why did you decide to do that?’ or ‘Do you think it was the right thing to do?’ where the goal of asking such questions is to communicate reasons to acknowledge and address a disposition to behave badly. If the reasons for acting

<sup>15</sup> Priestley 1788 1965.

<sup>16</sup> Smart 1961.

he provides in response to such questions indicate that he does indeed have such a disposition, it is then appropriate to request that he make an effort to eliminate it.<sup>17</sup> Such interactions will be legitimate in view of their contribution to the agent's moral reform. This model is a version of the answerability conception of moral responsibility proposed by T. M. Scanlon<sup>18</sup> and Hilary Bok<sup>19</sup> and developed extensively by Michael McKenna.<sup>20</sup>

I endorse such an answerability notion of moral responsibility that invokes three non-desert involving and forward-looking moral desiderata: protection of potential victims, reconciliation in personal relationships and with the moral community, and reform and

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hieronymi 2001. Hieronymi proposes that resentment is best understood as a protest; 'resentment protests a past action that persists as a present threat' (546).

Resentment is not a feature of the forward-looking notion of blame I set out, but on this account a core function of blaming someone is to protest a past action of his that persists as a present threat, as in Hieronymi's view.

<sup>18</sup> Scanlon 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Bok 1998.

<sup>20</sup> McKenna 2012.

formation of moral character.<sup>21</sup> Immoral behavior is often harmful, and we have a right to protect ourselves and others from agents who are disposed to act in ways that are apt to harm. Such actions can also impair relationships, and we have a moral interest in restoring impaired relationships through reconciliation. We also have a moral stake in the reformation of moral character plagued by dispositions to immoral behavior. Agents are blameworthy and morally responsible, on this model, by virtue of being targets of blame that serves these aims. Blame justified in this way is largely forward-looking, since its objectives are future protection, future reconciliation, and future moral reform. The immediate target of blame is most often a past action, and this is one remaining backward-looking element, but insofar as the purpose of blame is protection and moral formation, the past action will be addressed as a means to correct a persisting disposition to act immorally. To the degree that the goal of blame is reconciliation, the past action will also be addressed for its own sake.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> [Pereboom 2013](#) and [2014](#), ch. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Dana Nelkin for this point.

There is an account of praise that correlates with this conception of blame. Of the aforementioned objectives of blame—protection, reconciliation, and moral formation—the goal most clearly applicable to praise is moral formation. We praise an agent for morally exemplary actions to strengthen the disposition that produced it. Praise can also have a protective function, because strengthening dispositions of this kind diminishes threats to others. Corresponding to reconciliation is the notion of recognizing and celebrating successes and accomplishments in a relationship. Praising actions can also have this role.

On an account of this kind, the agent's practical rationality is engaged in blaming and praising. In the typical case of blame, we first ask for a moral explanation of the action, and if the agent has acted badly without excuse or justification, we intend for him to recognize that the disposition that resulted in the action should be eliminated. This change would be occasioned by the agent's recognizing and endorsing the moral reasons to make the change, and part of the function of the moral conversation is to occasion awareness of such reasons.<sup>23</sup> On this account, then, it is the agent's responsiveness to reasons, together with our moral interest in protection, the agent's moral formation, and our reconciliation with

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Fischer and Ravizza 1998.



him, that explains why he is an appropriate recipient of blaming in this forward-looking sense. A similar case can be made for praising.

One might now object that the self-directed attitudes of guilt and repentance are threatened by theological determinism. This concern is especially significant, the objector might add, because these attitudes are essential features of the moral practice of the monotheistic religions. Not only are they essential to good interpersonal relationships for agents prone to wrongdoing but they are also required for the moral improvement, development, and sense of integrity of such agents. Deprived of the attitudes of guilt and repentance, an agent of this sort would not only be incapable of re-establishing relationships impaired due to his wrongdoing, but he would also be barred from a restoration of his own moral integrity, and from a renewal of his relationship with God. Without the attitudes of guilt and repentance, the objection continues, there are no features of human psychology that can yield a restoration of this sort. Furthermore, theological determinism would undercut guilt because this attitude involves the belief that one is blameworthy, in the basic desert sense. If an agent did not feel blameworthy in this sense, the objector contends, he would also not feel guilty. In addition, because feeling guilty is undermined by theological determinism, repentance is also no longer an option, because feeling guilty is required to motivate an attitude of repentance.

However, suppose that you've acted very badly, but due to your theological determinist conviction, you deny that you are blameworthy for your behavior in the basic desert sense. Instead, you accept that you have done wrong, you feel deeply pained and sorrowful that you were the agent of wrongdoing. As Hilary Bok puts this idea:

the recognition that one has done something wrong causes pain. But this pain is not a form of suffering that we inflict on ourselves as a punishment but an entirely appropriate response to the recognition of what we have done ... we have slighted what we take to be of value, disregarded principles we sincerely think we should live by, and failed to be the sorts of people we think we should be. The knowledge that we have done these things must be painful to us.<sup>24</sup>

Bruce Waller expresses a similar thought:

It is reasonable for one who denies moral responsibility to feel profound sorrow and regret for an act. ... I find in myself the capacity for a vicious and despicable act, and the act emerges more from my own character than from the immediate stimuli, and my capacity to control such vicious behavior is

<sup>24</sup> Bok 1998, 168–9.

demonstrably inadequate. Certainly, I shall have good reason to regret my character—its capacity for vicious acts and its lack of capacity to control anger.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, due to your commitment to doing what is right and to moral reform, you resolve not to behave this way again, and you seek out help in reforming your dispositions. Moral sorrow and regret, so characterized, is especially apt for motivating repentance, moral self-improvement, and restoring one's relationships. Self-blame in the spirit of the basic desert conception might also realize these objectives, but, plausibly, the attitudes that Bok and Waller describe would not be less effective.

Finally, the theological determinist cannot, I've admitted, accept the doctrine of eternal damnation. Here I propose Schleiermacher's position—to maintain theological determinism together with the doctrine of universal salvation.<sup>26</sup> In fact, most reasonable reading of the texts of the Christian scriptures might well be on the side of universalism. Universalism is an option for the Christian who is a divine determinist, and it fits nicely

<sup>25</sup> Waller 1990, 165–6.

<sup>26</sup> Schleiermacher 1928.

with the forward-looking view of holding morally responsible that I endorse. To the extent that punishment is legitimate,<sup>27</sup> it aims at moral reform and reconciliation, and the doctrine of eternal damnation is incompatible with this position.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Pereboom 2001 and 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Here are a number of passages in the Christian New Testament that count in favor of universal salvation:

1. Romans 5:18. 'Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.'
2. Romans 11:32. 'For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.'
3. I Corinthians 15:22. 'For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.'
4. Colossians 1:19–20. 'For in him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

See also Keith DeRose's 'Universalism and the Bible,'

<http://pantheon.yale.edu/~kd47/univ.htm>.

## **Libertarianism, Theological Determinism, and the Problem of Evil**

What position on the problem of evil is open to the theological determinist? This position relinquishes any response that invokes free will on the libertarian (and also on the compatibilist) characterization. How bad a result would this be?

Let's begin with some stage-setting. Rather than advocating a positive theodicy, an account that aims for a complete and satisfying explanation of how it is that God's existence is compatible with the evils of this world, I prefer siding with skeptical theism, proposed in recent times by Stephen Wykstra and William Alston, among others.<sup>29</sup> The skeptical theist contends that because of the limits of our cognitive capacities, the nature of the good might well be beyond our understanding to such a degree that we should not rationally expect to understand how God's governance of the universe accords with divine perfect goodness.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, [Wykstra 1984](#) and [1996](#); also [Alston 1991](#). These skeptical theist accounts were occasioned by [Rowe 1979](#). Immanuel Kant developed a version of this strategy in his late essay 'On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', of which an English translation appears in [Wood and di Giovanni 1998](#); see [Pereboom 1996](#).

An advantageous way of casting the issue is in terms of the extent to which the world's evils reduce the probability of God's existence. Let E be a proposition that specifies the types and amounts of evil that the world actually features, and G be that hypothesis that God exists. What is the probability of G given E? According to the skeptical theist, given the limits of our cognitive capacities to understand the good, for us E does not reduce the probability of G, at least not so much as to make G less likely than not-G. According to an importantly distinct strategy, advocated by Peter van Inwagen, due to the limitations of our cognitive capacities and of our actual knowledge and understanding, we are not even in a position to assess the probability of G on E. Van Inwagen's version is continuous with his more general skepticism about probability assessments—our ability to assess probabilities is scant in domains substantially removed from the concerns of ordinary life.<sup>30</sup>

Different statements of skeptical theism agree that we might well have only limited cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good. But they sometimes diverge in their formulation of the upshot this limitation has for our doxastic attitude toward the existence of the requisite God-justifying purposes. In one version, because our cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good are limited, we are in no position to

<sup>30</sup> Van Inwagen 2006.

deny (or, equivalently, we are in no position to rule out) that there exist sufficient moral reasons for God's allowing the world's evils to occur, even if we have no sense at all of what these reasons might be, and as a result we lack good reason to believe that not-G is more likely on E than G is. But this statement of the position is vulnerable, since, by analogy, a skeptic about a well-confirmed scientific theory would then have an easy argument against his quarry. Is the claim that classical electromagnetic theory (CET) is approximately true well-supported by the evidence (EV) physicists have currently amassed for it? One might claim: because our cognitive capacities for understanding physics are limited, we are in no position to deny that there is a currently unspecified theory distinct from CET that is metaphysically more plausible and that explains EV as well, and as a result we have no reason to believe that CET is more likely on EV than not. Skepticism about historical claims can also straightforwardly be generated in this way. Our cognitive capacity to ascertain historical truths is limited, but often we reasonably judge some historical claim to be more likely than not on the relevant evidence, while we also are in no position actually to deny or rule out the existence of some as yet unspecified alternative hypothesis. The general problem is that rationally assigning a high probability to P is compatible with not being a position to deny the existence of some unspecified alternative hypothesis. Thus being in no position to deny that there is some unspecified God-justifying purpose for some evil's

occurrence is compatible with rationally assigning a high probability to there being no such purpose.

A reasonable solution is to supplement skeptical theism with more thoroughly developed skeptical hypotheses—more specific stories that support the truth of the skeptical claim. What is required are skeptical theistic hypotheses that are not just unspecified, but instead partially filled-out. Moreover, such hypotheses should focus on horrendous evil—more generally, Adams argues that such evils should be the focal point of the discussion, since they are most difficult to account for and yield the strongest challenge to theism. Two leading possibilities for such partially specified skeptical hypotheses are one that cites the value of free will and one that invokes the good of a process. Richard Swinburne’s development of the free will theodicy yields the best example of the former, and for the latter we’ll turn to John Hick,<sup>31</sup> Eleonore Stump,<sup>32</sup> and Adams.<sup>33</sup> I will argue that

<sup>31</sup> Hick 1978.

<sup>32</sup> Stump 1985.

<sup>33</sup> Adams 1999 and 2006.



partially specified hypotheses that invoke free will are ineffective in the case of horrendous evils, while hypotheses that cite the good of a process are more promising.

The free will theodicy in systematized form dates back at least to St. Augustine (354–430), and remains the most popular of all theodicies. On the most common contemporary version of the free will theodicy, God had the option of creating or refraining from creating what Alvin Plantinga calls significantly free beings.<sup>34</sup> By his characterization, a being is free with respect to a decision to perform an action, if, holding fixed the entire history of the universe up to the time of the decision, it is causally possible both that he make or else refrain from making this decision. Plantinga has in mind free will as characterized by the libertarian, according to which if a being is causally determined to make a choice, then by definition he is not free with respect to that decision. Further, an action is morally significant for a person at a time if it would be wrong for him to perform the action then and right to refrain, or vice versa. A person is significantly free at a time if he is then free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him. Again, a risk incurred by

<sup>34</sup> Plantinga 1974, 165–7; note that Plantinga does not advocate a free will theodicy, but rather a less ambitious free will defense, which is more akin to a partially filled out skeptical hypothesis.

creating such beings is that they might freely choose evil while the choice is unpreventable by God. Benefits include creatures having moral responsibility for their actions and being creators in their own right. According to this account since the benefits outweigh the risks, God is morally justified in creating significantly free beings, and he is not to blame when they choose immorally.

In accord with skeptical theism, we'll now evaluate this free will account not as a theodicy but as a partially filled-out skeptical hypothesis. One problem is that many of the more horrible evils would not seem to be freely willed decisions or to result from them. When people are harmed due to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and diseases, their suffering is not plausibly a consequence of evil free choices, and thus would not seem to be addressed by the free will hypothesis. Evils of this kind are usually classified as natural by contrast with moral evils. Sometimes evil decisions result from mental illnesses and are unfree as a result, and the free will theodicy would not seem to address these either. Thus it appears that the free will theodicy can only be partial, and that it would need to be supplemented by other considerations—and most advocates of this theodicy agree. Plantinga entertains the hypothesis that evils that appear to be natural result from the free

choices of beings such as demons, and they would then count as moral evils after all.<sup>35</sup> But he suggests this hypothesis only as a logical possibility, and given her standards of evidence, the skeptical theist may need to take this seriously.

A further concern, raised by David Lewis, is that even if we have free will of the libertarian sort, and many of our choices are freely willed in this libertarian sense, God could still have acted so as to prevent the consequences of those decisions.<sup>36</sup> As consequences of a decision we can count the bodily movements that result from it, and the changes in the world that the agent intends to result from these bodily movements. So one possibility is that after the Nazis freely decided to perpetrate genocide, God might have miraculously caused the means they devised, for example the rail transport or the gas chambers, to fail. Or more radically, one might argue that the value of the continued existence of beings with free will, given how they have freely decided, can sometimes be outweighed, and that God might justifiably arrange for people to die or to be disabled

<sup>35</sup> Plantinga 1974.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis 1993, 154. Similarly, J. L. Mackie 1955 remarks that 'Why should [God] not leave men free to will rightly, but intervene when he sees them beginning to will wrongly.'

before they can act on their evil decisions. God might thus have prevented Nazi genocide by having key leaders die of illnesses before being able to act on their decisions, or arranging circumstances differently so that prior to acting on these decisions would-be assassins had succeeded rather than failed.

It does seem that if the free will account is to answer this type of objection, it must be not only that the capacity for freely willed decision is significantly valuable, but also that the freely willed decisions themselves are significantly valuable, whether they are right or wrong. In addition, not only freely willed decisions themselves, but also their being carried out in action must have significant value. Swinburne has set out a version of the free will account that meets these objectives. He contends that it is not just freely willed decision tout court that has the relevantly high intrinsic value, but two characteristics in addition: freely willed decision's accomplishing what the agent intended (what he denominates efficacious free will), and freely willed decision's adjudicating between good and evil options each of which motivate the agent (serious free will, in his vocabulary). Swinburne argues that it is serious and efficacious free will that has the intrinsic value high enough to justify God in sometimes not preventing the decidedly evil consequences of immoral decisions. In his view, first of all, 'the very fact of the agent having a free choice is a great good for the agent; and a greater good the more serious the kind of free will, even if it is

incorrectly used.<sup>37</sup> In addition, an agent 'is an ultimate source in an even fuller way if the choices open to him cover the whole moral range, from the very good to the very wrong.'<sup>38</sup> Moreover, 'an agent who has serious efficacious free will is in a much fuller way an ultimate source of the direction of things in the world' than one who does not.

Furthermore, in his development of this account, Swinburne proposes that:

It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them, which will at least in part compensate for those experiences. It follows from this insight that it is a blessing for a person if the possibility of his suffering makes possible the good for others of having the free choice of hurting or harming them . . . and of choosing to show or not show sympathy.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Swinburne 1999, 87.

<sup>38</sup> Swinburne 1999, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Swinburne 1999, 103.

He illustrates this proposal with the example of the slave trade from Africa in the eighteenth century:

But God allowing this to occur made possible innumerable opportunities for very large numbers of people to contribute or not to contribute to the development of this culture; for slavers to choose to enslave or not; for plantation-owners to choose to buy slaves or not and to treat them well or ill; for ordinary white people and politicians to campaign for its abolition or not to bother, and to campaign for compensation for the victims or not to bother; and so on.<sup>40</sup>

A serious concern for this line of thought is that it conflicts with core features of our moral practice when horrendous evil is at issue.<sup>41</sup> First, as Lewis points out, for us the wrongdoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration; that is, when one is deliberating about whether to prevent or allow evil, a wrongdoer's free will has no value that

<sup>40</sup> Swinburne 1999, 245.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Pereboom 2004.

we take into consideration.<sup>42</sup> For example, if the inhabitants of a village decide to resist a group of soldiers threatening them with annihilation, we would not expect these villagers to consider the (purported) value of their attackers' freely willed actions successfully executed. But this value would have to be immense if this kind of consideration were sufficient to justify God in allowing rather than preventing the slave trade. In addition, if Swinburne were right, then when one hundred soldiers are freely deciding to perpetrate mass murder, twice as much value is at stake as when there are just fifty. In addition, there would be significantly less reason to harm in self-defense an attacker who has free will than someone who is mentally ill and not capable of free choice.<sup>43</sup>

Another problem for the free will theodicy is occasioned by Swinburne's plausible view that to choose freely to do what is right in a serious and valuable way one must have an appreciably strong countervailing desire to do what is wrong, strong enough that it might actually motivate a free choice.<sup>44</sup> He thinks that this point supports the free will theodicy, since it can explain why God allows us to have desires to do evil, and, by extension, why he

<sup>42</sup> Lewis 1993, 155.

<sup>43</sup> Thanks to Mark Moyer for this point.

<sup>44</sup> Swinburne 1999, 86–9.

allows choices in accord with those desires. But this point rather serves to undermine the force of the free will theodicy as an explanation for many horrible evils. We have no tendency to believe that the value of a free choice outweighs the disvalue of having desires to perform horrendously evil actions that are strong enough that they can in fact result in choice. For example, the proposal that it is more valuable than not for people to have a serious desire to kill young children for the reason that this gives them the opportunity to choose freely not to do so has no purchase on us. Our recommendation for people with desires of this sort is to have them undergo therapy to eliminate such desires. We have no tendency to believe that the value of making a free decision not to kill made in the struggle against a desire to do so carries any weight against the proposal to provide this sort of therapy. Furthermore, were we to come across someone with a strong desire to reinstate slavery but who nevertheless resisted actively seeking to do so, we would not think that his condition has more value overall than one in which he never had the desire to reinstate slavery in the first place. Moreover, I would guess that a significant proportion of people alive today—well over 90 percent—has neither intentionally chosen a horrendous evil nor had a genuine struggle with a desire to do so—they have never, for instance, tortured, maimed, or murdered, nor seriously struggled with desires to do so. But we do not believe that their lives would have been more valuable had they instead possessed such desires



even if every struggle against them was successful. Thus it is implausible that God would allow such desires in order to realize the value of certain free choices for the good. This aspect of Swinburne's theodicy may have some credibility in the case of evils that are not horrendous, but has none in the case of those that are. In summary, Swinburne's proposed value for efficacious and serious free will has no traction for us when it comes to horrendous evils, and thus for such evils it can't function as a plausible partially filled-out skeptical hypothesis.

Let us now examine partially filled-out skeptical hypotheses that invoke instead the value of developmental process. For many participants in the discussion, such value is at least part of the story,<sup>45</sup> but in recent times John Hick has most prominently foregrounded this consideration.<sup>46</sup> According to Hick's soul-building account, evil is required for the best sort of human intellectual, technological, moral, and spiritual development. Evil is valuable, on his account, because it occasions freely chosen efforts whereby it might be overcome, and because improvement of character—both within an individual and throughout human

<sup>45</sup> Swinburne 1999 agrees.

<sup>46</sup> Hick 1978.

history—results from such efforts. Without evil there would be no stimulus to the development of economic, technological, and social structures, which lie at the core of human civilization. And without evil there would be no occasion for care for others, devotion to the public good, courage, self-sacrifice, for the kind of love that involves bearing one another's burdens, or for the kind of character that is built through these qualities.

A soul-building skeptical theist hypothesis can be appropriated by the theological determinist. While our wills arguably must have a role in the soul-building process Hick describes, free will in the sense required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense need not. The process of educating and developing our characters, sensitivities, and abilities, even conceived without the freedom required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense, is a great good. Arguably, the development from cowardice to courage, from immorality to morality, from ignorance to enlightenment, is valuable, even if these processes are wholly causally determined by God in such a way as to exclude moral responsibility in this sense, for any feature of this process. Hick himself maintains that such processes are more valuable if they involve libertarian free will. I won't attempt to adjudicate this claim. But I think that it's highly plausible that they would have great value even if they were causally determined.

The main difficulty for this proposal, which Hick is concerned to address, is that evils often do not yield the specified goods, and in fact sometimes destroy rather than contribute to salutary development. Hick's response is that such evils are only apparently without purpose. In a world without such evils,

human misery would not evoke deep personal sympathy or call forth organized relief and sacrificial help and service. For it is presupposed in these compassionate reactions both that the suffering is not deserved and that it is bad for the sufferer ... in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience. It must be apparently unmerited, pointless, and incapable of being morally rationalized.<sup>47</sup>

To this one might object that evils on the order of World War II or the fourteenth-century plague are not required to occasion virtuous responses of these kinds or the attendant personal development. But still, it might be argued that these and similar horrors did provide unusually

<sup>47</sup> Hick 1978, 334.

challenging opportunities for virtuous responses, and that they did in fact result in especially valuable instances of such responses. Yet one might doubt whether refraining from preventing these calamities could be justified by the expected benefit. So it seems that here too, nothing in our experience or in our ordinary values allows for the horrendous evil-balancing weight that would have to be attributed to personal or societal development, and that we don't yet have an effective partially filled-out skeptical hypothesis.

Eleonore Stump argues that suffering from moral and natural evil contributes to a humbling recognition of oneself as having a defective will, which in turn can motivate one to turn to God to fix the defect in the will.<sup>48</sup> The defect in the will is that one has a bent toward evil, so that one has a diminished capacity to will what one ought to will. This account can also be recruited as a partially filled-out skeptical hypothesis. And in this case as well, no feature of this account demands libertarian free will, nor even a notion of free will of the sort required for moral responsibility. This process, as she describes it, does not require an indeterministic conception of free will, nor does it require that the agent be morally responsible in the basic desert sense, in this case praiseworthy, for turning to God on the occasion of suffering. It is sufficient that this change is seriously valuable, and that it

<sup>48</sup> [Stump 1985](#).

results in a more intimate relationship with God. This is a promising proposal, and the skeptical theist who is also a theological determinist can take it on. But can it begin to explain the horrendous evils?

This is a task that Adams specifically takes on. Her strategy is to specify a possible scenario in which God is good to all persons by insuring each a life that is a great good to the person on the whole, not merely by balancing off but also by defeating her participation in horrendous evils within the context of the world as a whole and of that individual's life.<sup>49</sup> On Roderick Chisholm's characterization, an evil is balanced off within a larger whole just in case that whole features goods that equal or outweigh it; while an evil is defeated within a larger whole just in case it actually contributes to a greater good within that whole.<sup>50</sup> In Adams's account, balancing off horrendous evil might be guaranteed by an afterlife in an environment in which we live in beatific intimacy with God. At the same time, actual defeat of such evil is also possible, for it may be that God will defeat all human suffering by empathetically identifying with it, since this would allow human beings to re-envision their

<sup>49</sup> Adams 1999, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Chisholm 1968.

suffering as a point of identification with God: 'by virtue of endowing horrors with a good aspect, Divine identification makes the victim's experience of horrors so meaningful that she would not retrospectively wish it away.'<sup>51</sup> Adams denies that participation in horrors is necessary for an individual's incommensurate good, for 'a horror-free life that ended in beatific intimacy with God would also be one in which the individual enjoyed incommensurate good.'<sup>52</sup> One might thus question why God would allow anyone at all to suffer horrendous evil. Adams claims to be able to provide only partial reasons in response to this question.<sup>53</sup> But skeptical theism requires no more than partial reasons, for it demands only partially filled-out skeptical hypotheses. This account of the defeat of evil also does not involve our having free will in the sense required for moral responsibility in the basic desert sense, and can thus be accepted by the theological determinist.

In Christ and Horrors, Adams provides a Christological development of this proposal. Its key elements are these. First, God has set us up, and bears responsibility for, horrors by

<sup>51</sup> Adams 1999, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Adams 1999, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Adams 1999, 165–6.

creating us as vulnerable personal animals in a world such as this.<sup>54</sup> This can be explained by seeing that horror-participation is a kind of human sacrifice, and such sacrifice functions as an initial stage in a process that leads to identification and union with God. Second, God acknowledges responsibility for, and then defeats horrors by self-sacrifice, and this requires the Incarnation.<sup>55</sup> God's coming into the world first of all allows God to be the target of our anger for responsibility for horrors, and God in fact encourages such a response (a lesson of the Book of Job). But as a result God becomes a horror-participant, and in doing so God manifests solidarity with and identifies with us as horror-participants.<sup>56</sup> Finally, this identification, because it unifies us with God, serves the defeat of the power of horrors to destroy the meaning of our lives.

The problem with the suggestion that the value of efficacious and serious free will balances off horrendous evil was that nothing in our experience or ordinary values allows for it, so it can't effectively serve as a partially filled-out skeptical theist hypothesis. We

<sup>54</sup> Adams 2006, 270–5.

<sup>55</sup> Adams 2006, 274.

<sup>56</sup> Adams 2006, 275–8.

need to keep in mind, however, that the standard does not require thorough but only partial understanding of the proposal. The elements of Adams's account are inspired by the widespread sacrificial aspects of human religion, and this provides reason to think that the criticism raised for Swinburne's suggestion doesn't apply in this case. There are common features in human experience that give support to the proposal, although we don't understand them thoroughly. Sacrifice of animals and humans is foreign to us in a way that it wasn't to our ancestors, and this makes understanding the view difficult. The element of the value of identification in suffering is more familiar. For these reasons, Adams's account yields a more effective partially filled-out hypothesis, and again, it does not require free will as the libertarian characterizes it.

### **Theological Determinism and our Relationship with God**

It may be that the main reason for the rise in libertarianism and the decline of theological determinism in the past several centuries, and especially in the last fifty years, is partly due to a change in how people have come to view their relationship with God. It's my sense that increasingly people have come to see their relationship with God on analogy with an exemplary human relationship. And seeing it this way would be difficult supposing a traditional theological determinist view in which God arbitrarily elects some to heaven and others for eternal



damnation. If someone has been predestined to damnation, what is the point of God's attempt to persuade him to live a moral and faithful life? In this respect, theological determinism fares better with the provision of universal salvation, for then God's attempts to persuade in such cases are not fated to be ineffective. Then in every case, these attempts might have their value as part of a process toward a relationship with God and moral formation.

But one might nevertheless have the sense, in O'Connor's words, that the process is a kind of charade, since on the theological determinist view it has been fixed with precision in advance by God.<sup>57</sup> The theological determinist would be averse to the term 'charade,' but the more general point has to be accepted. This is a respect in which our relationship with God would be very different from any human relationship. But what of the expressions of divine frustration with human response we encounter throughout scriptural writings (O'Connor, Chapter 7, this volume)? I agree that those expressions would need to be viewed as at least somewhat misleading. But even given libertarianism about our free will and Open Theism, such expressions of frustration would often have to be misleading as well. A study from New Zealand released in 2002 indicates that 85 percent of boys who have a weakened version of a gene that controls production of an enzyme called

<sup>57</sup> O'Connor, Chapter 7, this volume.

monoamine oxidase A—which breaks down key neurotransmitters linked with mood, aggression, and pleasure—and who were abused turned to criminal or antisocial behavior (30 percent of the study group has the weakened version of the gene).<sup>58</sup> Open Theists hold

<sup>58</sup> Here is a summary from [Caspi et al. 2002](#), 1–2: Avshalom Caspi and colleagues analyzed data from 442 New Zealand male adults involved in a long-term study. The researchers identified 154 subjects who were abused or maltreated as children, including thirty-three who were severely abused. The researchers then evaluated the influence of a particular gene on the abused children’s outcomes as adults. A ‘low activity’ variant of this gene which affects levels of monoamine oxidase A (MAOA), an enzyme that metabolizes the brain chemicals serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine had previously been linked to abnormal aggression. Caspi et al. discovered that 85 percent of severely abused subjects with the low-activity variant of the MAOA gene developed some form of antisocial behavior. In contrast, study participants with the high-activity variant only rarely exhibited aggressive or criminal behavior in adulthood even if they had been severely abused as children. ‘Although individuals having the combination of low-activity MAOA genotype and maltreatment were only 12 percent of the male birth cohort,’ the researchers say, ‘they accounted for 44 percent of the cohort’s violent convictions.’

that God could have prevented the genetic defect, and could also have prevented the violence. Wouldn't God's expressing frustration with their behavior also seem somewhat disingenuous? More generally, many people have natural dispositions that incline them to bad behavior, while others do not. Wouldn't most divine expression of frustration with especially bad behavior be suspect, given that God could have created all of us with the best sort of dispositions we find among human beings?

The more theological conceptions reduce God's power over evil to that approaching an exemplary human being's power over evil, the more a relationship with God can be like a relationship with such a human being. As God's power over evil is increased, God's policies become more mysterious, given the amount of evil in the world. Open Theism reduces God's power over evil relative to theological determinism, but not so much that a relationship with God would be closely similar to a relationship with an exemplary human being. The cost of Open Theism is a reduction in the strength of divine providence. Other positions in the history of religion reduce God's power even more; Zoroastrianism denies divine omnipotence, and posits competing evil forces. Certain process theological views limit God's power to the power of persuasion. These positions allow for a relationship with God that is yet more similar to a relationship with an exemplary human being, but at a

much greater cost to providence. On any orthodox monotheistic view, the analogy to human relationships is spiritually important, but it cannot be exact.

### **Final Words**

One cannot rationally accept both theological determinism and the libertarian conception of free will. The main reason to opt for theological determinism is that it provides an uncontroversial route to a strong notion of divine providence. The only proposal for securing such a conception of providence absent theological determinism is Molinism, and its status is uncertain.

Libertarianism would provide us with basic desert moral responsibility, and also a promising response to the problem of evil. But theistic religion can do without basic desert moral responsibility, and responses to the problem of evil that essentially involve free will on the libertarian conception turn out to be ineffective when it comes to horrendous evils, even when the epistemic standards for such an account are lowered in the way that skeptical theism would allow. For these reasons I side with theological determinism, and regard the libertarian conception of free will as dispensable.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Thanks to Marilyn Adams, Dana Nelkin, Dan Speak, Kevin Timpe, and the audience at the conference in honor of Marilyn Adams at Georgetown University in March 2014 for

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