

Theological Determinism and Divine Providence

Derk Pereboom

in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, Ken Perszyk, ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 262-79.

I. Providence, comfort, and determinism

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. A reason to endorse 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 will. It would be attractive to retain this notion of divine providence while accepting a conception of human beings as having libertarian free will. This is just what Molinism claims 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.¹ But both libertarianism and Molinism are highly controversial positions.² Those who value an uncontroversial way to secure a strong notion of divine providence have a reason to take theological determinism seriously.

In a broad range of conceptions of theistic spirituality, the understanding that everything that happens is causally determined by God in accord with a divine plan for the world is a great comfort for us. We find this view expressed in ancient Stoicism, Judaism,

Islam, and in much of historical Christianity. In the Calvinist tradition, the importance of this view was stressed in the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, authored by Ursinus and Olevianus in 1576:

Question 1. What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.³

Human life is subject to pain, deprivation, failure, and death. How do we cope with these realities? Part of the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism involves a conviction that everything that happens to us, to the last detail, is in accord with God's will. A great comfort and sense of security is provided by the conviction that the most minor harm cannot befall us unless God, who is perfectly benevolent, wills it to happen.

We might ask for a more precise specification of the mechanism by which this conviction results in comfort. According to the Stoic view, God determines everything that happens in accord with the good of the whole universe, while the nature of this good is incompletely understood on our part.⁴ There is an all-encompassing divine plan, neither whose nature nor means of realization we understand very well if at all, but we can nevertheless be assured that everything that occurs is determined by God with an aim to

the realization of that plan. By identifying with this divine aim, we can reconcile ourselves to the suffering in our lives. In the Stoic conception, this involves abandoning our merely personal concerns – our ordinary human aspirations for personal survival, happiness, and success – and willing what God wills instead.

René Descartes, in a letter to Chanut, eloquently expresses this Stoic conception (that is, if we take his reference to free will to be compatibilist). In this excerpt, he sets out “the path one ought to follow to arrive at the love of God”:

But if ... we heed the infinity of his power, through which he has created so many things, of which we are the least part; the extension of his providence that makes him see in one thought alone everything that has been, is, shall be, and could be; the infallibility of his decrees which, although they do not disturb our free will, nevertheless cannot in any fashion be changed; and finally, if, on the one hand, we heed our insignificance, and if, on the other hand, we heed the grandeur of all created things, by noting the manner in which they depend on God and by considering them in a fashion that has a relationship to his omnipotence... meditation upon all this so abundantly fills the man who hears it with such extreme joy that, realizing he would have to be abusive and ungrateful toward God to wish to occupy God's place, he thinks himself as already having lived sufficiently because God has given him the grace to reach such knowledge, and willingly and entirely joining himself to God, he loves God so perfectly that he desires nothing more in the world than that God's will be done. That is the reason he no longer fears either death, or pains, or disgraces, because he knows that nothing can happen to him save

what God shall have decreed; and he so loves this divine decree, esteems it so just and so necessary, knows he ought so entirely to depend upon it, that even when he awaits death or some other evil, if *per impossibile* he could change that decree, he would not wish to do so. But if he does not refuse evils or afflictions, because they come to him from divine providence, he refuses still less all the goods or licit pleasures one can enjoy in this life, because they too issue from that providence; and accepting them with joy, without having any fear of evils, his love renders him perfectly happy (to Chanut, 1 February 1647, AT IV 608-9).⁵

If our love for God is of the right sort, our identification with God's purposes would be so thorough that even if we could, we would not refuse death or other personal suffering, since we would accept all of this as proceeding from the divine decree.

In the Stoic vision, we should align ourselves with the divine 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. This stance requires that we identify with a notion good that might well diverge significantly from one's personal conception of the good. A serious concern is that this identification is much too demanding, given our capabilities. What if one's role in the divine plan were to suffer miserably up until a final end to one's existence? The solution for many theists is to specify that God not only aims at the good of the whole, but also at the good of the individual. Marilyn Adams (1999, 55) proposes that God is in the end good to every person by insuring each a life in which all of the suffering experienced contributes to a greater good within that very life. Transforming the Stoic conception in this way plausibly yields a notion of providence from which each of

us is actually able to derive security and comfort.

II. Theism 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.

A long-standing objection to such a position is that it would have God be the author of sin, for 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 and as a result we are not morally responsible for our actions.⁶ 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 blameworthy actions. This removes at least some of the sting of the charge that God is the author of sin.

A central concern in the historical free will debate is whether the sort of free will required for moral responsibility is compatible with the causal determination of our actions by factors beyond our control, and this is of course also a concern for theological

determinism. According to hard determinism, free will characterized in this way is incompatible with this type of causal determination. Here it is crucial to recognize that the term 'moral responsibility' is used in a variety of ways, and that the type of free will or control required for moral responsibility in some of these senses is uncontroversially compatible with the causal determination of action by factors beyond our control. But there is one particular sense of moral responsibility that has been at issue in the historical debate. It is this: for an agent to be morally responsible for an action is for it to be hers in such a way that she would deserve blame if she understood that it was morally wrong, and she would deserve credit or perhaps praise if she understood that it was morally exemplary. The desert at issue here is *basic* in the sense that the agent, to be morally responsible, would deserve the blame or credit just because she has performed the action, given sensitivity to its moral status, and not by virtue of consequentialist or contractualist considerations. This characterization allows an agent to be morally responsible for an action even if she does not deserve blame, credit, or praise for it – if, for example, the action is morally indifferent. Moral responsibility in this sense is presupposed by our retributive reactive attitudes, such as the varieties of moral anger. The type of moral responsibility that incompatibilists claim not to be compatible with determinism is the sense characterized by basic desert and the reactive attitudes that presuppose it.

On an incompatibilist view, theological determinism is incompatible with the free will required for moral responsibility in the sense just specified. I propose a position in which theological determinism is true and we are not morally responsible in this sense. In 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, how God can cause or allow natural evil.

But does denying moral responsibility incur significant costs for a traditionally theistic outlook? It might be thought to threaten the attitudes of blame, guilt, forgiveness, repentance, gratitude and love, since these attitudes and practices would seem to presuppose moral responsibility for our actions. These attitudes are traditionally held to be core features of the ethical conceptions of the major theistic religions. In this and the next section, I will argue that theological hard determinism has a satisfactory response to this concern.⁷

Let us begin by considering whether the hard determinist can retain a notion of blame, supposing that blameworthiness in the basic desert-entailing sense is relinquished. The hard determinist rejects the legitimacy of any blaming practice that presupposes that the agent being blamed is morally responsible in the basic-desert sense, or is an appropriate target of basic-desert entailing reactive attitudes. But in George Sher's (2006) analysis, blame is at its core a certain belief-desire pair: the belief that the agent has acted badly or is a bad person; and the desire that he not have performed his bad act or not have his current bad character. The hard determinist can, without inconsistency, endorse these beliefs and desires about badness. The objection might be pressed that if we gave up the belief that people are blameworthy in the basic-desert sense, we could no longer legitimately judge any actions as good or bad. This is implausible. Even if we came to believe that a perpetrator of

genocide was not morally responsible in the basic-desert sense because of some degenerative brain disease, we could still legitimately maintain that it was extremely bad that he acted as he did. In general, denying blameworthiness would not threaten judgments of moral badness, and, likewise, denying praiseworthiness would not undermine assessments of goodness. So far, then, the hard determinist can accept the legitimacy of blaming on Sher's analysis.

Sher also contends that blame involves a set of affective and behavioral dispositions, and at this point one might think his account conflicts with hard determinism. But first, he does not regard any of these dispositions as essential to blame, but only connected to it in a looser sense. Given the looseness of this tie, the hard determinist can endorse blaming in Sher's sense. She might not endorse all of the affective and behavioral dispositions one might canvas – in particular, not those that presuppose or can only be justified in virtue of basic desert. Still, two important dispositions to which Sher draws our attention – “to apologize for our own transgressions and vices and to reprimand others for theirs” (2006, 108) – are fully compatible with a hard determinist conviction. Also, the hard determinist does accommodate backward-looking attitudes toward wrongdoing that do not presuppose basic desert. These include sadness or sorrow about the wrongdoing of another, and, as we will see, regretting one's own wrongdoing – more on this shortly. In addition, the essential elements of blame on Sher's account, which are backward-looking – the belief that the agent has acted badly, or is a bad person, and the desire that he not have performed the bad act, or not have his current bad character – are also not undercut by any claim the hard determinist makes.

In Thomas Scanlon's (2009, 128-31) analysis, to blame an agent for an action is to judge that it shows something about the agent's attitude toward oneself and/or others that impairs the relations that he can have with them, and to take one's relationship with him to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations justifies as appropriate. Whether blame defined in this way can be acceptable to the hard determinist depends on the nature of the appropriateness to which this characterization refers. If this notion is taken to introduce basic desert, then the result will be ruled out. But there is an epistemic or evidential reading that accommodates hard determinism. One of Scanlon's examples illustrates this idea. You trusted a friend, but you then noticed that he repeatedly behaved in an untrustworthy manner, as a result of which it is now appropriate for you to take your relationship with him to reflect this diminished trust. Here the justification is at least partly, if not wholly, evidential. You believed the friend was trustworthy to a high degree, but you then acquired good evidence that he is not especially trustworthy, and as a result you have reason to judge that an attitude of his is relationship-impairing. You now make this judgment, and take your relationship with him to be modified in a way that it justifies as appropriate, that is, you take your relationship to be impaired because the bond of trust has been weakened. All of this will be admissible for the hard determinist.

One might now object that the self-directed attitudes of guilt and repentance are threatened by hard determinism. There is much at stake here, the objector might claim, for these attitudes are central components of the ethical conceptions of the major theistic religions. In these conceptions, not only are they essential to good interpersonal relationships for agents prone to wrongdoing, but are also required for the moral

improvement, development, and sense of integrity of an agent of this sort. Without the attitudes of guilt and repentance, such an agent would not only be incapable of reestablishing relationships damaged because he has done wrong, but he would also be barred from a restoration of his own moral integrity, and his relationship with God. In the absence of the attitudes of guilt and repentance there are no human psychological mechanisms that can generate a restoration of this sort. Hard determinism would appear to undermine guilt because this attitude essentially involves a sense that one is blameworthy, in the basic-desert sense, for what one has done. If an agent did not feel blameworthy for an offense, the objector continues, he would also not feel guilty for it. Moreover, because feeling guilty is undermined by hard determinism, repentance is also no longer an option, since feeling guilty is required to motivate a repentant attitude.

However, suppose that you do wrong, but because you believe that hard determinism is true, you reject the claim that you are blameworthy. Instead, you accept that you have done wrong, you feel deeply sad, sorrowful, or pained that you were the agent of wrongdoing. As Hilary Bok expresses 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” (1998, 168-69). Bruce Waller captures a similar conception: “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 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” (1990, 165-66). Furthermore, because you have a commitment to doing what is right, and to moral improvement, you would resolve not to perform an action of this kind again, and perhaps seek out help to make this change. Regret, sorrow, or guilt without basic desert, characterized in these ways, is especially apt for motivating repentance, moral self-improvement, and taking steps to restore one’s relationships. Blaming oneself in the basic-desert sense might well also achieve these results, but it is implausible that the attitudes that Bok and Waller describe would be less effective.

On one conception of forgiveness, this attitude presupposes that the person being forgiven deserves blame in the basic-desert sense, and if this is correct, forgiveness would indeed be undercut by hard determinism. Dana Nelkin (2008) argues that forgiveness does not have this presumption, and I think she is right. But even if it does, there are features of forgiveness that would not be jeopardized by the truth of hard determinism, and they can adequately take the place this attitude usually has in relationships. Suppose a friend has wronged you in similar fashion a number of times, and you find yourself very sad, angry, and resolved to dissolve your friendship. Subsequently, however, he apologizes to you, which, consistent with hard determinism, expresses his recognition of the wrongness of his behavior, his wish that he had not wronged you, and a commitment to moral improvement. Because of this you change your mind and decide to retain the friendship. In this case, the

feature of forgiveness that is consistent with hard determinism is the willingness to cease to regard past immoral behavior as a reason to weaken or dissolve one's relationship.

Forgiveness of this kind can be conceived as retracting blame in the sense Scanlon characterizes it. My forgiving someone who has wronged me would involve my having judged that what he did indicated something about his attitude toward me that impairs the relationship he can have with me, but due to his repentance, no longer taking my relationship with him to be modified in a way that this judgment of impaired relations justifies as appropriate. The judgment of impaired relations is withdrawn because I take the other to have given up the attitude toward me that impairs the relations he can have with me.

In another kind of case, I might, independently of the offender's repentance, simply choose to disregard the wrong as a reason to alter the character of our relationship. This attitude is also not called into question by hard determinism. The sole aspect of forgiveness that is challenged by the hard determinist perspective is the willingness to overlook blame or punishment deserved in the basic sense. If one has relinquished belief in such deserved blame and punishment, then the willingness to overlook them is no longer needed for good interpersonal relationships.

III. Gratitude and love

Gratitude might appear to presuppose that the agent to whom one is grateful is morally responsible in the basic-desert sense for a beneficial act, whereupon a hard determinist

conviction would undermine gratitude. However, even if this is so, as in the case of forgiveness, certain core aspects of this attitude would remain unaffected, and these aspects can provide what is required for good interpersonal relationships, and a relationship with God. Gratitude involves, first of all, being thankful toward someone who has acted beneficially. It is not implausible that being thankful toward someone usually involves the belief that she is praiseworthy for some action. Still, one can be thankful to a young child for some kindness without believing that she is morally responsible for it. This aspect of gratitude could be retained even without the presupposition of basic-desert praiseworthiness. Typically gratitude also involves joy as a response to what someone has done. But no feature of hard determinism poses a threat to the legitimacy of being joyful and expressing joy when others are considerate or generous in one's behalf. Expressing joy can bring about the sense of harmony and goodwill often produced by a sense of gratitude unmodified by hard determinist belief.

One might now object that love would be subverted if hard determinism were true. Let us first ask whether loving another requires that she be free in the sense required for moral responsibility. One might note here that parents love their children seldom, if ever, because their children possess this sort of freedom, or because they freely (in this sense) choose the good, or because they deserve, in the basic sense, to be loved. Moreover, when adults love each other, it is also seldom, if at all, for these kinds of reasons. Explaining love is a complex task. In addition to moral character and action, factors such as one's relation to the other, her appearance, manner, intelligence, and her affinities with persons or events in one's history have a part. But suppose that moral character and action are of the greatest

importance in producing and maintaining love. Even if there is an important aspect of love that is essentially a deserved response to moral character and action, it is unlikely that one's love would be undermined if one were to believe that these moral qualities are not the result of free and morally responsible choice. For moral character and action are loveable whether or not they are deserving of praise in the basic sense. Love of another involves, most fundamentally, wishing well for the other, taking on many of the aims and desires of the other as one's own, and a desire to be together with the other. Hard determinism does not threaten any of this.

One might contend, however, that love that is freely willed is genuinely valuable, especially as a response to God, and not worth nearly as much if it is not freely willed. Consider the following excerpt from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, whose theme is a familiar topic of theological controversy:

So will fall
He and his faithless Progeny: whose fault?
Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of me
All he could have; I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall. ...
Not free, what proof could they have given sincere
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
Where only what they needs must do, appeared,
Not what they would? what praise could they receive?
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,

When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,
Made passive both, had served necessity,
Not me. They therefore as to right belonged,
So were created, nor can justly accuse
Their maker, or their making, or their Fate;
As if Predestination over-ruled
Their will, disposed by absolute Decree
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.
So without least impulse or shadow of Fate,
Or aught by me immutably foreseen,
They trespass, Authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I formed them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthrall themselves... (Book III, 95-125)

A key to Milton's vision of the meaning of the universe is that people have the opportunity to freely respond to God, and the freedom at issue is libertarian. In his conception, if divine grace were to causally determine a correct response to God, this response would have little or no value; "what praise could they receive? What pleasure I from such obedience

paid/When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)/Useless and vain, of freedom both
despoiled/Made passive both, had served necessity/Not me..."

Let's assume that the most desirable response to God is love. One might argue that it is valuable to be loved by another as a result of her free will, and that without free will, love loses much of its value. However, against this, it is clear that parents' love for their children – a paradigmatic sort of love – is often produced independently of the parents' will. Robert Kane (1996) endorses this last claim, and a similar view about romantic love, but he nevertheless argues that a certain type of love we want would be endangered if we knew that there were factors beyond the lover's control that determined it. He says:

There is a *kind* of love we desire from others – parents, children (when they are old enough), spouses, lovers and friends – whose significance is diminished ... by the thought that they are determined to love us entirely by instinct or circumstances beyond their control or not entirely up to them To be loved by others in this desired sense requires that the ultimate source of others' love lies in their own wills (1996, 88).

But leaving aside *free* will for a moment, in which types of case does the will intuitively play a role in generating love for another at all? When the intensity of an intimate relationship is waning, people sometimes make a decision to try to make it succeed, and to attempt to regain the type of relationship they once had. Or when one's marriage is arranged by parents, one may decide to do whatever one can to love one's spouse.

But first, in such situations we might desire that another person make a decision to love, but it is not clear that we have reason to want the decision to be *freely* willed in the

sense required for moral responsibility. A decision to love on the part of another might greatly enhance one's personal life, but it is not at all obvious what value the decision's being free and thus praiseworthy would add. Secondly, while in circumstances of these kinds we might desire that someone else make a decision to love, we would typically prefer the situation in which the love was not mediated by a decision. This is true not only for romantic attachments, but also for friendships and for relationships between parents and children.

One might suggest that the will can have a key role in *maintaining* love over an extended period. Søren Kierkegaard (1843) suggests that a marital relationship ideally involves a commitment that is continuously renewed. Such a commitment involves a decision to devote oneself to another, and thus, in his view, a marital relationship ideally involves a continuously repeated decision. A relationship with this sort of voluntary aspect might in fact be highly desirable. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see what is to be added by these continuously repeated decisions being freely willed in the sense required for moral responsibility, as opposed to, say, expressing what the agent really stands for. Thus although one might have the initial intuition that freely-willed love is desirable, it is not easy to see exactly where free will might have a desirable role in producing, maintaining, or enhancing love. The same would seem to be true for our love of God.

However, a special worry might arise if the proposal to be evaluated is that the love people have for God is divinely determined. More generally, how would you react if you were to discover that your love for another person was causally determined as a result of what she intentionally does? Perhaps it is not determination by the other party per se, but

rather the kind of determination that would be objectionable. Suppose that Maddy causally determines you to love her by manipulating your brain so that you are oblivious to her flaws of character, and by slipping a love potion into your lemonade. That would be objectionable. But imagine instead that you have a self-destructive tendency to love people who are harmful to you, and not to love those who would benefit you, partly because you have a tendency to overlook people's valuable characteristics, such as kindness and concern for the well-being of others. Suppose Maddy slips a drug into your lemonade that eliminates this tendency, and determines you to love her by way of appreciating her valuable characteristics. How bad would that be? It would seem that what is unacceptable is not being determined by the other party *per se*, but rather how one is determined, and that there are varieties of determination by the other party that are not objectionable. So now suppose we were determined to love God by being presented with a clear view of divine nature as it really is, so that if we apprehended it, love of God would be inevitable. That, I think, would be far from unacceptable.

IV. Theological determinism and the problem of evil

What position on the problem of evil is open to the theological hard determinist? This view must relinquish any response that invokes libertarian free will, and this might be considered a severe drawback. But first, rather than advocate a positive theodicy, which aims to explain how it is that God's existence is compatible with the evils of this world, I prefer to side with skeptical theism, developed in recent times by Stephen Wykstra and William Alston, among

others.⁸ Skeptical theism claims that due to the limitations of our cognitive capacities, the nature of the good is or might well be beyond our understanding to such a degree that we should not expect to understand how it is that God's governance of the universe accords with divine goodness.

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 details the kinds and amount of evil that the world features, and G be that hypothesis that God exists. What is the probability of G on E? According to skeptical theism generally, given the limited nature of our cognitive capacity to understand the nature of the good, for us E does not reduce the probability of G so as to make it less likely than not. In fact most skeptical theists will not concede that for us E reduces the probability of G significantly at all – whatever probability the existence of God has independently of E is substantially retained given E. A reason for taking this stance is that once the theist admits that E can significantly reduce the probability of G, she is in the position of having to bargain over the exact degree of the reduction. According to an importantly distinct strategy, advocated by Peter van Inwagen (2006), due to the limitations of our cognitive capacities and of our actual knowledge and understanding, we are in no position to assess the probability of G on E. Van Inwagen's version is continuous with his more general – but restricted – skepticism about probability assessments. In his view, our ability to assess probabilities is scant in domains removed from the ordinary concerns of life.

Different versions of skeptical theism concur that we do or might well have only limited cognitive capacities for understanding the nature of the good. Significantly, they

diverge in their formulation of the result this limitation has for our attitude towards 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 deny* (or, equivalently, *we are in no position to rule out*) that there are moral reasons for God's allowing the world's evils to occur, even if we have no inkling as to what these reasons might be, and for this reason we have no good reason to believe that not-G is more likely on E than G is. But this statement of the position is vulnerable, for, by close analogy, a skeptic about a well-confirmed scientific theory would then have an easy argument against his quarry. Is the claim that quantum mechanics is approximately true (Q) well-supported by the evidence physicists have currently amassed for it (V)? 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 quantum mechanics that is metaphysically more plausible and that explains V as well, and as a result we have no reason to believe that Q is more likely on V than not. Skepticism about historical claims can also straightforwardly be engendered in this way. Our cognitive capacity to discern historical truths is limited, but there are many cases in which we reasonably judge some historical claim to be more likely than not on the evidence, while at the same time we are in no position actually to deny or rule out the existence of some as yet unspecified alternative hypothesis. The general problem is that one's rationally assigning a high probability to P is compatible with one's not being a position to deny the existence of some unspecified alternative hypothesis. Thus one's 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.

The remedy is to supplement one's skeptical theism with a more developed sense of the possible goods that might justify God's allowing or causing the evils of this world, thereby raising the probability of G on E. Supplementation with such hypotheses does not all by itself need to bear the burden of making G on E, say, more likely than not, since our cognitive limitations yield another significant factor in raising this probability. Given the commitment to theological hard determinism, possible goods adduced to supplement the skeptical theist hypothesis cannot involve the sort of free will required for moral responsibility in the basic-desert entailing sense. However, hypotheses are available that invoke only goods compatible with theological hard determinism. Let us examine two such hypotheses that derive from positive theodicies, John Hick's (1978) soul-building proposal and Marilyn Adams's (1999) theodicy from the value of identification with God.

According to Hick's soul-building theodicy, 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 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.

The main difficulty for this sort of theodicy, which Hick is concerned to address, is

that evils often do not yield the specified goods, and in fact sometimes destroy people rather than contributing to their 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 (Hick (1978), 334).

One might doubt that this response is satisfactory. However, the skeptical theist does not aspire to providing a positive theodicy, but only some indication of what the goods might be that justify God in permitting evil – perhaps partial reasons of a certain sort. Perhaps we can say that this is what the soul-building theory does provide. Hick is right to claim that there are cases of horrible evils that have had a profoundly good effect on people. This provides some degree of understanding of the idea that God causes or allows especially horrible evils for reasons of soul-building. We seem incapable of answering the objections raised against it, but this is exactly what skeptical theism predicts: we do not understand the nature of the good well enough to grasp why it is that God would cause or allow evil to realize this good.

The soul-building skeptical theist hypothesis can be appropriated by the theological hard determinist. While our wills plausibly 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. And 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.

The theodicy that Adams develops can also be appropriated by the skeptical theist who accepts theological hard determinism. Her strategy (1999, 55) 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. On Roderick Chisholm's (1968/9) characterization, an evil is balanced off within a larger whole if that whole features goods that equal or outweigh it, while an evil is defeated within a larger whole when it actually contributes to a greater good within that whole. 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. But 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 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" (1999, 167). 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" (1999, 167). One might thus question why God would allow anyone at all to suffer horrendous evil. Adams (1999, 165-66) acknowledges not to have any more than partial reasons in response to this question. But skeptical theism requires no more than partial reasons, for it does not propose a positive theodicy. 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 hard determinist.⁹

Outside of abstracted philosophical speculation, I myself find it psychologically impossible to countenance the idea that God causes or allows certain particular horrible instances of suffering to achieve some specified good, including soul-building or divine intimacy. But traditional theism in general has a problem of this type, since all versions must agree that there are horrendous evils God could have prevented by virtue of divine omnipotence. In response, many theists are near-Zoroastrians in their everyday assumptions: God is extremely powerful and good, but the contest against evil, both natural and moral, is a genuine struggle, whether it be against personal powers or natural forces, since God's power falls short of omnipotence. Open theism proposes an approximation of this outlook, but because it preserves divine omnipotence, the understandable and familiar Zoroastrian story remains beyond reach.¹⁰ Skeptical theism offers an alternative that also does not falter in its endorsement of divine omnipotence. The stance one takes in everyday life toward any particular horrendous evil is to avoid speculation about the specific reason

God why causes or allows it, on the ground that we lack the capacities to comprehend such matters, while at the same time affirming that the divine governance of the world is thoroughly providential.

V. Final words

As a means of securing a strong notion of divine providence, it might be that Molinism is theologically preferable to a view according to which God causally determines everything that happens, since Molinism allows for libertarian free will. But I believe the deterministic perspective is not decidedly worse. At least, given our limited cognitive capacities and our lack of ability to understand God's purposes, we should not be confident in judging that the deterministic perspective is worse. It is extremely difficult for us to believe that God brings about the horrors of this world, but it is perhaps no less challenging to maintain that God merely allows them. In addition, if we turn our focus to the goods that the traditional theistic religions consider most valuable, such as moral progress and a relationship with God, a deterministic conception of the plan for realizing those goods might well turn out to be as attractive as a Molinist alternative. Moreover, given the seriousness of the objections to Molinism and to our having the libertarian free will that Molinism invokes, it might well be that, all things considered, theological determinism is the better view.

References

Adams, Marilyn McCord (1999) *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, (Ithaca, NY:

Cornell University Press).

Adams, Robert Merrihew (1977) 'Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14, 109-17; reprinted with additional notes in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 110-25.

____ (1991) 'An Anti-Molinist Argument', in James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, 343-53.

Alston, William (1991) 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, 29-67. Reprinted in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 97-125.

Blom, John J. (1978) *Descartes, His Moral Philosophy and Pyschology* (New York: New York University Press).

Bok, Hilary (1998) *Freedom and Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Brennan, Tad (2005) *The Stoic Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Chisholm, Roderick (1968/9) 'The Defeat of Good and Evil,' *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 42, pp. 21-38.

Flint, Thomas P. (1998) *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

Freddoso, Alfred J. (1988) 'Introduction', in Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans. and ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University

Press).

Hasker, William (1986) 'A Refutation of Middle Knowledge', *Noûs*, 20, 545-57.

_____ (1989) *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

_____ (1995) 'Middle Knowledge: A Refutation Revisited', *Faith and Philosophy*, 12, 223-36.

_____ (1999) 'A New Anti-Molinist Argument', *Religious Studies*, 35, 291-97.

_____ (2004) *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge).

Hick, John (1978) *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, revised edition).

Inwood, Brad (1985) *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Kane, Robert (1996) *The Significance of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Kierkegaard, Søren (1843) *Either/Or*, v. 2, tr. Walter Lowrie, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

Molina, Luis de (1595) *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, tr (of Part IV) A. J. Freddoso, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Nelkin, Dana (2008) 'Responsibility and Rational Abilities: Defending an Asymmetrical View', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 89, 497-515.

Pereboom, Derk (1994) 'Stoic Psychotherapy in Descartes and Spinoza', *Faith and Philosophy*, 11, 592-625.

____ (1996) 'Kant on God, Evil, and Teleology', *Faith and Philosophy*, 13, 508-33.

____ (2001) *Living without Free Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

____ (2009) "Free Will, Love and Anger," *Ideas y Valores* 141 (2009), pp. 5-25.

Plantinga, Alvin (2004) 'Supralapsarianism, or "O Felix Culpa"', in Peter van Inwagen (ed.), *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1-25.

Rowe, William L. (1979) 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16, 335-41.

Scanlon, Thomas (2009) *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Sher, George (2006) *In Praise of Blame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ursinus, Zacharius, and Olevianus, Caspar (1576) *The Heidelberg Catechism*,

<http://reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>

van Inwagen, Peter (2006) *The Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Waller, Bruce (1990) *Freedom without Responsibility* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

Wood, Allen W., and di Giovanni, George (eds.) (1998) *Kant: Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Wykstra, Stephen J. (1984) 'The Human Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16, 73-94.

____ (1996) 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The*

Notes

¹ Luis de Molina (1595); Freddoso (1988). For an excellent exposition and defense of Molina's position, see Thomas Flint (1998).

² For objections to Molinism, see Robert M. Adams (1977), (1991); William Hasker (1986), (1989), (1995), and (1999). I argue against the plausibility of our having libertarian free will in (2001).

³ Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus (1576).

⁴ I discuss these issues in (1994). For an account of providence in Stoicism, see, for example, Inwood (1985) and Brennan (2005).

⁵ AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964-76. The translation is from John J. Blom (1978), 206-7.

⁶ Perhaps Friedrich Schleiermacher had hard 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 Wilhelm Dilthey's *Leben Schleiermachers* under the title '*Über die Freiheit des Menschen*'. In the *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1983) it appears as '*Über die Freiheit*' (KGA I.1, 1984, 217-357), which has been translated into English as *On Freedom* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

⁷ I have developed this material in various places, including (2001), and most recently in (2009).

⁸ See, for example, Stephen J. Wykstra (1984) and (1996); also William Alston (1991). These skeptical theist accounts were occasioned by William Rowe's (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 (eds.) (1998); see my (1996).

⁹ A further theodicy available to the hard determinist is developed by Alvin Plantinga (2004), in which sin and suffering are required for the greater good of the incarnation and atonement.

¹⁰ See, for example, William Hasker (1989), (2004).