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God, Freedom, and Time

God is usually seen as all-powerful, infinitely wise, and present everywhere (the traditional phrase is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent). For even from a Deist position, someone who could create life in all its complexity and arrange the galaxies, and who could order the intricate relationships within and among atoms, would have to be, if not infinitely powerful, at least more powerful than us by orders of magnitude. The Biblical view is certainly in agreement with this concept (e.g., Acts 17:24-25; Rom 1:19,20).¹

¹ This does not mean that God can do things which we cannot define and therefore call logically inconsistent. For example, one might say that God cannot create white darkness. Since we do not know what white darkness is, we would not know if God created it. There may not be any such thing. A tougher question is whether God can create a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it. But how would you know that it was that heavy unless He tried and could not lift it? And how would you know that He had really tried as hard as He could? Or if it did move, how would you know that it was the heaviest stone He could make? The question of the stone seems to hinge on whether God can do anything irreversible. He may or may not (He can't do something both irreversible and reversible in the same sense at the same time, for that would be logically inconsistent, or more accurately, we couldn't define it), but we would have no way of knowing. What we can say is that He chooses to do things which are not reversed.

And God must know a lot, even from a Deist perspective. Think of the intelligence required to fashion the rules of nuclear, atomic, and molecular interaction, and the further intelligence needed to make carbon compounds and water plentiful enough on this planet to sustain life, and the precise position of our orbit in relationship to the warmth of the sun, with a magnetic field shielding us from its more damaging rays, then the creation of life in its complexity. But the Biblical view goes even further. God not only knows about people (Ps 8:3-8), but unborn babies (Ps 139:13-6), sparrows, and the number of hairs on your head (Matt 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7). If Jesus and his hearers had both been familiar with our concepts I am sure he would have said, "Not one atom leaves your body without My Father's knowledge." And, as we have seen while reviewing quantum theory, He would have been precisely correct.

Finally, God's presence everywhere may be deduced from the Bible (for example, Ps 139:7-10). Precisely what omnipresence is is not spelled out. One practical definition is that God is aware of everything that happens to everyone and can intervene if He sees fit. This would be a combination of the first two properties above. From the standpoint of scientific theology it makes no direct difference whether this is correct or whether God is actively moving all forms of energy according to His own laws. There is no testable way to distinguish between the two models, although the second is simpler and meshes more easily with quantum theory.

This view of God is a comfortable one, has elegance in the scientific sense, and has generally been accepted by Christian theologians. There we could let the matter rest, if it were not for one more property of God affirmed by the Bible, namely, His goodness (for example, Ps 107, Luke 18:19). This gives rise to the problem of why there is evil in the world if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good.

There are several common ways to answer the question. We can say that we do not know enough to understand the answer to the question (sometimes a valid reply—see Job 38-41). We can say that God can do what He wants (which destroys any meaning to the word good as applied to God). We can say that evil has no reality. (But the results of evil are certainly real. Rather than saying that evil is the absence of good, we would probably be more accurate to say that evil is twisted good.) Finally, we can blame evil on another being. If that being is as powerful as God, then the fundamental

Judeo-Christian (and Moslem) tenet of one God is incorrect (and we may also have difficulty distinguishing which is evil on a theoretical basis). So evil apparently began with someone originally subordinate to God, who is now in rebellion.

Then why did God allow rebellion? One answer to this question is that God desired freedom for His creatures and gave them the power to choose. If they chose wrongly, evil would result. For God to run this risk He had to have a greater good in mind. This good is usually believed to be the ability of His creatures to love.

I agree with the general outlines of this approach. There are many good presentations of this answer and I do not intend to add to them at this time. There are only two matters on which further comment is needed; freedom, and its relation to foreknowledge.

There are at least two kinds of freedom. One is the ability to do whatever we want, unhindered by outside forces. We could call this external freedom. The second is the ability to choose between two (or more) alternatives unforced by either external or internal factors. We could call this internal freedom.

A few general observations are in order. First, although they both could be thought of as freedom, they are very different. External freedom is a matter of degree. No one ever has complete external freedom. On the other hand, internal freedom is either there or not.² One can have a great deal of external freedom with no internal freedom, or one can have almost no external freedom and still have internal freedom. Finally, internal freedom is the

² Can one have degrees of internal freedom? At this point we may not have a convincing answer to this question. This is partly because we do not have a good scientific model for internal freedom. Determinism is out by definition, but the model of random events is not much better. If God "plays dice with the universe", then how many throws do you get, and are the dice loaded? Does one chance in 1,000 qualify for a fair chance? One in a million? It could even be argued that if one knows the precise composition of the dice, their precise position and velocity, the precise force fields through which they moved, and the precise surface toward which they were thrown, that how they landed could be predicted, thus making that form of chance actually deterministic and not chance at all. Because we don't have a good model, we need to be very careful not to be too dogmatic about our knowledge of freedom.

We should also note that freedom is by the nature of things not provable by observation. For once the choice is exercised, it is final, and one could always look back and say that that is the way it would have turned out anyway. Freedom is sometimes defined as a choice that could go either way. But there is no way of backing up and trying again to prove that it really could go either way. Therefore from a scientific point of view it is not provable. The closest we can come is to say that people in remarkably similar circumstances have turned out remarkably differently.

only kind that can relieve God from direct responsibility for creating evil. From this point on when we use the term freedom we will mean internal freedom unless otherwise specified.

As noted above, freedom allows for a solution to the problem of evil. But it also creates another problem. For God claims to know the future (Isa 46:10; compare Isa 65:24, John 6:64) and some prophecies seem to back Him up (for example, Daniel; some others are clearly conditional; see Jer 18:1-10, Jonah 4:2), and it is difficult to see how God can foresee free choice.

We can predict the future to a limited extent. Our predictions are made by noting repeatable patterns and extrapolating, or else they are based on our ability to cause future events by our own actions. God's ability to predict the future is no doubt based partly on similar premises, and since He knows everything that can be known and is able to do anything He wants (enough), it stands to reason that He should be able to predict the future much better than we.

But such ways of predicting would seem to prohibit freedom. For if God causes the event it is really His choice, not ours. And if He knows because we are locked into a repeatable pattern, then again the choice is not ours, but the creator or creators of the pattern. We would be controlled and not free.

Since much of human behavior is predictable, it follows that internal freedom is not something constantly possessed by humanity. This is a little disconcerting, as we would like to believe that we can choose to do right whenever we want. But one who is in the clutches of substance abuse demonstrates a lack of internal freedom, and we are constantly discovering new vices with the same iron grip, such as gambling, sexual excess, and child abuse. In all probability other sins such as pride are just addictive if not more so, and the only reason we don't have groups for them is that they are harder to define than, say, alcohol. (Even here we have a problem. How much alcohol does one have to drink before he or she has a problem?)

But we still have to deal with the question of whether (and if so how) God can predict the few truly free choices we do have. There are three answers I know of. First, there may not be any free choices. This would be the position of Calvin and (though he might protest) Luther. This view puts God back on the hook for causing all the evil we see in the world. Second is the view that God cannot predict free choice. Therefore He must make contin-

gency plans for all possibilities. This view is currently popular in certain theological circles. But it seems to be at odds with the Biblical claims. I would not rule it out completely at this point, but it is a solution with a certain amount of strain. The third solution has to do with God's relationship with time. I will try to outline this view and give some reasons.³

It is generally accepted that space presents no problem to God. He can be actively involved anywhere, and His control extends from galaxies to atoms. The usual explanation of this is that He is "outside" of space. That is, He is not limited by a body as we are.

In the same way it is generally accepted that God is over all time ("From everlasting to everlasting thou art God"). There never was a time that God did not exist, and there will never be a time when He will cease to exist. The usual explanation of this is that God is in time and experiences it as we do but simply started first and will outlast it. The view under discussion holds that God is "outside" of time in a similar way to the way in which He is "outside" space.

It is worth reviewing the fact that earlier in our history people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. Then it was moved to the sun, then to the center of our galaxy. It is sometimes said that there is no center to the universe, but actually by the theory of relativity it is more accurate to say that any point can function as the center.

But if God does not play favorites noticeably (and to add elegance to the theory, at all) with points in space, and Special Relativity is right, then God cannot be in time. For time and space are partly interchangeable.⁴ To see why this is, we will conduct what Einstein would call a thought experiment. Theoretically, there is no reason why God cannot communicate across great distances in a fraction of a second. He can take a warning half-way around the globe, impress someone to pray, watch him pray, responding in internal freedom, and then use that prayer to influence far distant events. And in fact I, and perhaps you, have heard reasonably reliable stories to that effect. For example, a

³ I am heavily indebted to C. S. Lewis for the major outlines of this view, and through him to a number of older theologians. But the strength of the scientific reasons for it are not generally appreciated.

⁴ So that for any two reference systems, $x_1^2 + y_1^2 + z_1^2 - t_1^2 = x_2^2 + y_2^2 + z_2^2 - t_2^2$.

mother in the U. S. during World War II is suddenly wakened in the middle of the night with a premonition of danger (the only time it happens). She looks at her clock and prays for her son on a ship in the South Pacific. At approximately that moment a torpedo which has been heading toward her son's boat swerves unexplainedly and misses it. She and her son later compare notes.

On earth this story is not intrinsically impossible given an omnipresent God. Light can pass from one end of the globe to another in about 0.04 seconds, so simultaneity is not an important consideration. But it takes 2 seconds for light to get to the moon, and if we send someone to Mars it may take light 5 to 21 minutes to get to our astronauts and the same time to get back again. For Jupiter it is 45 minutes (43 ± 8). Supposing the same scenario develops on a trip to Jupiter. The spacecraft suddenly gets into trouble. God wants (for His own reasons) a mother's intercessory prayer. How soon can He tell her? How soon can the results of her prayer be effective on board ship?

If we limit God to the speed of light, then two things follow. First, God is limited to $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours turnaround time and He cannot act this way on problems requiring more rapid resolution. Second, God cannot communicate with Himself at greater than the speed of light, and at each point in the universe God is essentially cut off from every other point. You wind up with a multitude of independent calculators rather than one Mind controlling the universe. This would seem to be a species of pantheism rather than the monotheism of the Judeo-Christian tradition. And, as we have seen, quantum mechanics requires communication faster than light.

If we march God through time but allow message transmission faster than the speed of light, we create a new problem. For to an observer (perhaps an angel or a being on another world) moving rapidly in the direction from Jupiter to Earth (relative to Earth), it will appear that the solution to the astronaut's problem will happen before the mother on Earth prays, and to an observer moving rapidly in the direction from Earth to Jupiter, the mother is made aware of the problem before it happens. The only solutions are to deny that the problem could exist (to say that God never uses free choice in this manner), to limit God to the speed of light, to insist that God has a motion frame of His own, or to say that God is outside of time.

The first approach seems to me to beg the question. The sec-

ond approach has been proven wrong already. The third seems to ignore the lessons we have learned about God and space. It raises the question, what is really standing still? Is the earth standing still? Or the sun? Or the center of our galaxy? Or does God have some other galaxy which is the real reference point? In which case it will appear to *us* that the mother prays before the incident occurs, or that the resolution will occur before the mother prays (depending on whether Earth or Jupiter is in the lead). This is a mathematically possible solution, but a theoretically very unsatisfying one. In addition, quantum mechanics gives no hint of an absolute simultaneity.

But what do we mean by God being outside of time? We mean that God invented time as He invented space. God designed the universe very roughly analogous to the way that an author would design a novel or a moviemaker would design a movie, not only working with space but also with time. Now there are certain rules He must follow if He is to allow His characters true freedom of their own. He must be careful not to make predictions which overwhelm all free choice. He must allow free choice to have consequences (for example, He cannot take someone who has made an undesirable [to God] free choice and replace him with someone who appears to be the same but really has the memory of choosing rightly in that situation). And in that sense this model of free choice turns out to be identical in practice to God's deliberately choosing not to foreknow free choice. Thus the model of limited Divine foreknowledge has a great deal of truth to it. This is one consequence of time and space not being completely interchangeable.

But there are two important aspects of God's being outside of time which differ from the limited foreknowledge model. One is that God is able to go backward in time from a free choice and prepare for it, as long as His preparations do not directly impinge on the person's ability to choose. Thus, this model has no trouble (like the limited foreknowledge model has) with stories such as the one of the missionary's child who prays for a doll for Christmas and the next morning receives the doll in the mail, which was sent weeks before. The limited foreknowledge model must either postulate that the stories are not true, or that they are random, or that there is no free choice involved, or that some packages get lost in the mail on the day they are to be delivered.

The other important aspect of God's being outside of time is

that the final outcome of our story is assured. For after God had written our story He still had the choice of not publishing it, so to speak, so the fact that we are here is proof that the story has a happy ending, or God would never have brought our universe into existence.

Other things that are affected by this view are the relative importance of free choice and the physical universe, and the ultimate reality of that universe. Remember the old argument over whether a tree falling in a forest with no one to hear it makes any noise? In a sense this view would hold that until a creature with free choice hears it, the tree not only makes no noise, it can be said in a sense not to have fallen. Christians believe that the material universe is not the ultimate reality. But this view would have it that the material universe is not only dependent on God's creative ability but also on our own choices. We partly determine the physical reality of large objects. Perhaps we should have known all along that we are of much more value than many stars.

In this view also, we are allowed to pray about events that may have been in the past, or even were in the past. The exception is that for events which we know happened one way, we cannot pray for them to have happened another way and expect our prayers to be answered positively, as that is praying against the revealed will of God.⁵ So the important dividing line is not between the past and the future, but between events that we know and events that we do not know.

I have heard two objections to this model. One is that we cannot deal with time in this way This is tantamount to saying that relativity is wrong. One who takes this position must realize that this was the position of most of the world of physics. Physicists were forced to change their position by the overwhelming weight of evidence. It may help to note that the theory of relativity, although it predicts strange things happening with time, does not predict the reversal of time. The distortions are perfectly predictable. They are also usually very small and unnoticeable at everyday speeds and accelerations (a clock would lose less than one ten millionth of a second on a round trip transatlantic flight of a Concorde). In short, there is no reason why space and time should not behave as the theory of relativity predicts, and good evidence that they do.

⁵ I am not saying that God is happy with everything that goes on here on Earth. But I am saying that nothing goes on without His permission, and that therefore every event that takes place is His will, given all previous and subsequent circumstances.

The second objection is that a God outside of time is too much unlike us, too strange. But if the physics is right, then a God who must march through time with us is even stranger. For He has a private time frame but hasn't left us a clue as to what it is. It is actually much easier from a physicist's point of view to accept a God Who is outside of time in the same way that He is outside of space.⁶ His major link to us is not time-limitation, any more than it is space-limitation. It is intelligence and creativity.

I would like to finish with two thoughts. First, the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev 13:8) makes much more sense according to this theory.⁷ God knew what the cost would be when He first created the world. The plan of salvation was not an afterthought.

Second, if one can be sure on other grounds that a prophecy is from God, one may have confidence in it even if it involves the free choice of some humans. God will not prophesy so as to abolish freedom entirely, any more than He will force us completely in other ways, but He does have the ability to fore-see, to see into the future directly (not like us, who have to make projections), so we may have complete confidence if He says things will turn out a certain way.

⁶This does not mean that God cannot or does not act in time and space. It simply means that He is not limited by them.

⁷The RSV translation is strained here, as it transposes the phrase. The Greek is written as in the KJV.