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WHAT IS SO GOOD ABOUT MORAL FREEDOM?

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Many Christian philosophers believe that it is a great good that human beings are free to choose between good and evil – so good, indeed, that God is justified in putting up with a great many evil choices for the sake of it. But many of the same Christian philosophers also believe that God is essentially good – good in every possible world. Unlike his sinful human creatures, God cannot choose between good and evil. In that sense, he is not 'morally free'.

It is not easy to see how to fit these two theses into a single coherent package. If moral freedom is such a great good in human beings, why is it not a grave defect in God that he lacks it? And if the lack of moral freedom does not detract in any way from God's greatness, would it not have been better for us not to have it?

In this paper I shall develop, but ultimately reject, what I take to be the strategy that offers the best chance of moving between the horns of this dilemma. Since the problem is especially acute for Plantinga's version of the free will defence and for Swinburne's theodicy, I shall begin with a brief discussion of their views.

I. SWINBURNE AND PLANTINGA

Swinburne claims that it is impossible for God to do evil because he is omniscient and perfectly free.[1] Because he is omniscient, God always knows what he ought to do. And because he is perfectly free, God is never subject, as we are, to irrational desires and inclinations of the sort that might tempt him not to do what he ought. Swinburne concludes that God is not free to choose between good and evil. God may be 'perfectly' free, but he is not *morally* free. Presumably this makes God better, not worse.

[1] See R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 90–102.

And yet when he turns to the problem of evil (in ch. 9), Swinburne puts considerable emphasis on the value of moral freedom. He insists that the freedom to choose between good and evil is a very great good indeed. According to Swinburne's theodicy, God gives us moral freedom because he wants us to share in his creative activity – because he wants us to be able to make a real 'difference' in the world, and to have a deep responsibility for the welfare of other creatures.

This is puzzling. If God has 'perfect' freedom, rather than moral freedom, would we not be more like God, and therefore better than we are, if he had made us 'perfectly' free too? Why then has he given us a nature that subjects us to the irrational desires and inclinations that make it so easy for us to do evil? If God had made us 'perfectly' free instead of 'morally' free, he would have guaranteed that our presence would always make the right sort of difference to the world. Surely the world would then have been a much better place?

Swinburne does not address this issue directly, but he says a number of things that are relevant to it. Briefly, his position seems to be that God could have made, and perhaps did make, creatures who are perfectly free and essentially good. Such creatures would not be morally free; but they would be in no way worse or less valuable than ourselves. Nor (p. 157) is the kind of freedom they possess less valuable than ours; it is just different.

> Maybe there is a point in making creatures who are morally good from the start – for moral goodness is a good thing. And maybe there is a point in making creatures who are almost morally good from the start. But there is also surely a point in making creatures who have a considerable choice over a period of time, of whether to do what is morally right.

Surely this makes our problem worse? If you were offered two equally tasty and exquisite dishes, and were informed that one of them, but not the other, would very possibly make you violently ill within twenty-four hours of tasting it, I dare say you would not think it appropriate to 'have some of each'. And yet this is just the sort of thing Swinburne's God seems to have done. On Swinburne's view, God knows that moral freedom is good, but he also knows that it is no better than the alternative. He knows also that moral freedom is extremely risky – that there is a substantial risk that morally free creatures will abuse their freedom. (Swinburne's God does not have complete knowledge of future contingents; but Swinburne would surely not deny that God knows the odds much better than we do.) And if he did not know the risk when he created the first humans, he must surely know it by now!

Swinburne's God is a lot like the fellow who decides to take his chances with 'some of each', even though sticking with the 'safe' dish would be 'just as good' and would have none of the risk of trying both. So one may well

ask 'Why would God put up with so much evil in order to make *moral* freedom possible, when he could have *perfect* freedom without it?'.

The problem is, if anything, more serious in the case of Plantinga. For Plantinga claims that moral freedom, 'significant freedom', as he calls it, is *logically* required for genuine moral responsibility, and that moral responsibility is *logically* presupposed by moral goodness. Without the freedom to choose between good and evil, therefore, we would not be significantly free, or morally responsible, or morally good.

These claims form the backbone of Plantinga's version of the free will defence, according to which God made us free in order to make us morally responsible for our choices and thus able to achieve a measure of moral goodness. God puts up with moral evil because he cannot prevent it without also eliminating all the distinctively moral goodness in the world. He chose to actualize this possible world because, thanks to his 'middle knowledge' of what each possible free creature would do with its freedom in any possible situation, he knew that this world would contain a better overall balance of moral good and moral evil than any alternative available to him.[2]

This would lead one to expect Plantinga to hold that God is morally free to do evil even if he never actually chooses to do any. But no. Plantinga, like Swinburne, holds that God is *essentially* good – that there is no possible world in which God is not morally good. Why? Because God is the Greatest Possible Being, and because Plantinga thinks God would be 'greater' if he possesses all his great-making characteristics in every possible world. Since essential moral goodness is thought to be 'greater' than merely contingent goodness, Plantinga thinks (see pp. 214–15) that the Greatest Possible Being must possess essential moral goodness.

But surely this is inconsistent? If significant freedom is required for moral responsibility and moral goodness in human creatures, why is it not required for moral responsibility and moral goodness in God? It looks as if consistency would require Plantinga to choose between saying that God is essentially good, and thus lacks moral freedom, and saying that moral freedom is a very great good for human beings.

II. A POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

Is there any way out? Can a theist sensibly hold on to something like the free will defence and also assert that God is essentially good?

[2] See A. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 167. Plantinga does not claim to prove that this is why God acted thus. He thinks we have no good reason for denying it, and that this is good enough for a 'defence' against the argument from evil.

Desiderata for an adequate solution

What is needed, I suggest, is a rationale for saying that moral freedom is required for moral goodness in human beings, but not for moral goodness in their Creator. And this can only be provided by an account of moral freedom and moral responsibility on which all four of the following propositions come out true:

1. Human beings are both morally responsible and morally free
2. In human beings, moral responsibility does presuppose moral freedom
3. God, on the other hand, is not morally free; his nature is such that he cannot choose between good and evil
4. Nevertheless, God is morally responsible for his actions, and is perfectly good in the distinctively moral sense.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to a critical discussion, and ultimately to the rejection, of the proposal which seems to me to offer the best chance of satisfying these requirements.[3] The proposal tries to provide an account of freedom and moral responsibility on which all four desiderata come out true, thus enabling the theist to avoid being impaled by either horn of our dilemma.

Moral responsibility and the principle of alternative possibilities

What kind of freedom is required for moral responsibility, anyway? Is the freedom to choose between good and evil really necessary? A good place to start is with our reaction to Harry Frankfurt's much discussed 'counter-example' to the 'principle of alternative possibilities' – i.e., to the claim that moral responsibility for an action entails that one could have avoided doing the act.

Frankfurt's example goes something like this. The wicked Black wants Jones to murder the hapless Green. Without Jones' knowledge, Black has implanted electrodes in his brain and is monitoring all his mental activity. If Jones shows any sign of not deciding to murder Green, Black will intervene and stimulate Jones' brain in such a way as to cause the relevant murderous intention. As it happens, Jones does decide on his own to do the murder, and Black does not intervene.

It seems that Jones could not have avoided murdering Green. For had he not decided 'on his own' to do so, Black would have anticipated him and intervened in such a way as to ensure that he would form the relevant intention. And yet our judgement about the case is that Jones is morally

[3] See Eleanore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Absolute Simplicity', *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), pp. 353–82. This article contains at least the seed of the proposal I want to consider.

responsible for the murder. Frankfurt concludes that alternative possibilities are not necessary for moral responsibility.

Libertarians sometimes reply that Jones could have chosen differently, and so forced Black's hand – even if he could not have avoided ending up murdering Green.[4] That may be so, but even if it constituted a sufficient defence of the libertarian insistence on alternative possibilities, another point is worth making, one that is more relevant to our present concerns.

Even if we could extend Frankfurt's counter-example to cover all of Jones' choices (perhaps by giving Black 'middle knowledge' of all Jones' 'counterfactuals of freedom'[5]), and even if we granted that Jones could not have chosen otherwise, we would still take him to be morally responsible for the murder. (At least that is my own feeling about the case.) Why is this so? Apparently because Jones did it 'on his own', without Black's intervention.

But what is it for Jones to do it 'on his own'? Frankfurt assumes that it must be that Jones' character and desires and beliefs were the causes of his decision, with no untoward intervention from outside – no interference with the usual process of deliberation. Frankfurt believes that this provides strong support for a compatibilist account of freedom. But, as John Martin Fischer has pointed out, an incompatibilist might also consistently reject the principle of alternative possibilities.[6] How so? Well, he might concede that 'doing it on one's own' is sufficient for moral responsibility, while offering an incompatibilist analysis of what it is to 'do it on one's own'.

To see how this might go, let us imagine a libertarian who distinguishes, as Swinburne and Plantinga do, between agent causation and event causation, insisting that the former is not reducible to the latter. Such a libertarian might take the following view of moral freedom and responsibility.

'What is required for moral responsibility', he might say, 'is that agents be the first cause, so to speak, of their own act. They do it, and no one and nothing else makes them do it. They are responsible – the buck stops with them – whether or not it is true that, exactly as things were at the time, they could have done otherwise.'

On this account, moral responsibility is incompatible with any sort of causal determinism. For if causal determinism were true, then something

[4] For a full discussion of this issue, see the excellent discussion in A. Eshelman, 'Alternative Possibilities and the Free Will Defence', *Religious Studies*, 33 (1997), pp. 267–76. Eshelman argues that Frankfurt's counter-example cuts the ground out from under the free will defence.

[5] I here refer to a doctrine, championed in the fifteenth century by the Jesuit theologian Luis de Molina and in the twentieth by Plantinga, that God has always known what every possible free creature would freely do in any possible situation. This knowledge forms a critical part of the ground on which God decides what to create. See R. Gaskin, 'Conditionals of Freedom and Middle Knowledge', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 43 (1993), pp. 412–30.

[6] See J. Fischer, 'Responsibility and Control', *Journal of Philosophy*, 89 (1982), pp. 24–40.

(apart from themselves) would be making agents act as they do, and they would not be responsible for their actions. But as long as an agent is the 'first cause', as long as he is the one who (knowingly) starts the causal chain that leads (e.g.) to murder, he is responsible for it. Even if the principle of alternative possibilities, as Frankfurt calls it, is false, the agent can still be responsible in a sense that is incompatible with causal determinism.

A full critical examination of this conception of responsibility is outside the scope of the present paper.[7] What I hope to do here is to exhibit its bearing on the problem at hand. Will it help the theist break out of our dilemma? Will it enable him to hold on to the free will defence without giving up the doctrine of God's essential goodness?

Initially, it might seem not. If we drop the principle of alternative possibilities, are we not also giving up on the freedom to choose between good and evil? Yes and no. Yes, in the case of God. No, in the case of human beings.

To start with the case of God, on the present proposal God is morally responsible in a strong, incompatibilist sense even if he is not free to choose between good and evil. After all, nothing apart from God determines what God will choose, or what God will do. No nefarious Black and no antecedent determining causes of any kind are responsible for his behaviour. God is the absolute first cause – unlimited and undetermined by anything apart from himself.

Now what about human beings? Could not God have made them into autonomous 'first causes' while at the same time making their natures such that they could do only what he wanted them to do? But surely this question answers itself? If God had made me with a nature that guaranteed that I always did the right thing, then something outside me, *viz*., God, would have caused me to choose good over evil. On the present conception of responsibility, then, I would not be responsible for always doing the right thing. The buck would stop not with me, but with God.

That is why, paradoxical as it seems at first, moral responsibility in human beings requires freedom to choose between good and evil, whereas moral responsibility in God does not require it. In this way, we are able to achieve all four of our desiderata. God is morally responsible for all his

[7] This sort of account of freedom and responsibility has lately received quite a lot of attention from philosophers of religion, especially in connection with the problem of reconciling divine foreknowledge with human freedom. As long as God's foreknowledge does not *causally* determine the future actions of his creatures, it can be argued that even if foreknowledge rules out alternative possibilities, it is not incompatible with the sort of freedom that is presupposed by moral responsibility. See especially Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford UP, 1991), pp. 154–68; and David Hunt, 'On Augustine's Way Out', *Faith and Philosophy*, 16 (1999), pp. 3–26.

choices, even though he cannot choose between good and evil. But unlike God, human beings must possess the fateful freedom to choose between good and evil if they are to be morally responsible for choosing the good. Thus we can move between the horns of our dilemma, happily maintaining both the doctrine of essential goodness in God and the great value of moral freedom in human beings.

III. WHY IT WILL NOT WORK

Or can we? Here is a simple thought-experiment. There are two groups of finite persons, group alpha and group beta. The members of both groups, the alphas and the betas, as I shall call them, are naturally good, good in a way that makes it impossible for them to choose evil. What makes them different is that the alphas were *made* to exist by something outside themselves (a favourable heredity and environment, a benevolent God, or whatever), whereas the betas were *not made* by anything at all – they simply happened to come into existence.

If the proposed account of moral responsibility were correct, there would seem to be a clear difference in the moral standing of the two groups. The betas would be morally responsible for their actions (since nothing gives them their good natures), whereas the alphas would *not* be morally responsible (since they are *made* with good natures).

But surely this is absurd? Would it not be unreasonable to treat members of the two groups differently, bestowing moral praise on the betas, but not on the alphas? No doubt the members of both groups should be congratulated on their good luck. But regardless of how persons with such fine natures came to exist, would it not be more appropriate to praise their natures than to praise them?

Some philosophers may think there is nothing to this line of argument. 'Your thought-experiment is impossible', they may say. 'There couldn't have been anything like your group beta. Finite persons are, necessarily, creatures. As such, they are *given* natures, *made* with them. Since the scenario you have dreamt up is not a possible one, we do not have to worry about it.'

As far as I can see, there is nothing *conceptually* impossible in my thought-experiment. But my critic may still want to say that it is *metaphysically* impossible for any finite being to be uncaused.[8] After all, some theists hold that everything in the universe is essentially dependent on God's creative activity for its existence and nature. And some go even further, claiming that there

[8] Impossible, that is, in Plantinga's 'broadly logical' sense. See Plantinga, pp. 1–2.

is no possible world in which there is any finite thing that is not thus dependent on God.

These are deep waters, and I am not at all sure that I can (or wish to) swim in them. So for purposes of discussion let us simply grant that every finite being must, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, receive its existence from God. What bearing does this have on the issue? It certainly follows that no possible world contains anything like group beta. But how does it follow that we do not have to take seriously what we are inclined to say about it?

Perhaps my imaginary critic is thinking along the following lines. 'All conditionals are true if they have impossible antecedents. Where *p* is an impossibility, there can be nothing genuinely informative about the claim that *q* would be true if *p* were true. For it is equally true that not-*q* would be true if *p* were true.'

I do not agree. Subjunctive conditionals with impossible antecedents can be non-trivially true.[9] By way of illustration, here is a pair of contrary-to-fact conditionals:

(a) If humans had existed uncreated, they would (still) have been featherless bipeds
(b) If humans had existed uncreated, they would (instead) have been feathered quadrupeds.

Both (a) and (b), we are supposing, have impossible antecedents, but whatever the currently fashionable semantics for subjunctive conditionals may say about this, it seems clear to me that (a) is true and (b) false. The reason is that whether it is created or uncreated *makes no difference* to the number of legs or to the type of covering an animal has. Creation (by itself) is neutral both with regard to both the number of legs and the type of covering. But human nature (created or not) is *not* neutral between these alternatives. Four-legged animals with feathers would not have been humans, but something else instead.

If this is right, then my imaginary critic's objection collapses. Our judgements about what would be the case if something impossible were so can sometimes be both true and informative. So let us put the question again, this time in the first person.

If I were a member of group beta, would that make me more responsible for my good deeds than I would be if I were a member of group alpha? If, that is, I were essentially good, good by nature, but were not made so by anything, would that make me more responsible for my good deeds than I

[9] See Linda Zagzebski, 'What If the Impossible Had Been Actual?', in Michael D. Beaty (ed.), *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy* (Notre Dame UP, 1990), pp. 165–83.

would be if something had made me so? Does the presence or absence of a creator who made me with this good nature make a difference to whether I am morally responsible for the good deeds that flow from it?

I do not see that it does. If I simply chanced to exist, and if my nature determined me always to choose the good, then I would be no more responsible for my 'good' behaviour than I would be if someone had made me with that same nature. In either case, I would be doing only what my nature determined me to do. Something other than myself, *viz*., my nature, would be determining me to choose the good.

Here, then, is the problem. Why is the case of God not like that of a finite but essentially good person who is not (let us suppose) *made* to be essentially good? Why does God's essential goodness not entail that something other than God himself – *viz*., God's nature – determines his behaviour? Or, to revert to my two imaginary groups, why is God not 'subject to' his nature in the way the betas (if they existed) would be 'subject to' theirs?

IV. IS GOD 'SUBJECT TO' HIS NATURE?

There is one obvious difference between the case of the betas and that of God which I have not yet taken into account. According to the bulk of the theological tradition, God's existence is not contingent – he exists in all possible worlds. It may be said that in this respect God is quite different from the betas, who just 'happen' to exist. Does this help with our problem?

I cannot see that it does. One's nature is a set of properties that one could not have failed to possess – properties that one possesses in any possible world in which one exists. So even though the existence of the betas would be contingent, it would not be contingent that they have perfectly good natures. Without those natures, *they* would not exist. In that critical respect, their case is like that of God.

So just how is the case of God relevantly different? Why is it that being good by nature does not deprive *him* of moral responsibility, even though it *would* deprive the betas of moral responsibility? Why is God not 'subject to' his nature, even though they would be 'subject to' theirs?

As far as I can see, there are just two ways to defend the reasonableness of this distinction. One would be to say that God (unlike the betas) is not 'subject to' his nature, because there is no distinction between God and God's nature – God (again unlike the betas) is *identical* with his nature. The other possible defence would be to say that God is not 'subject to' his nature because he is causally responsible for it. I shall consider and reject these possibilities in turn.

Could God be identical with God's nature?

According to the Thomist doctrine of divine simplicity, God is *identical* with his nature, whereas we creatures are not identical with our natures. If this claim were defensible, it might seem to provide a very neat solution to the whole puzzle. For it would allow us to deny that in being guided by his own perfect nature God is 'subject to' anything distinct from himself, while affirming that essentially good finite persons, even 'uncaused' ones like the imaginary betas, would be 'subject to' something distinct from themselves, *viz*., their natures.

To reap the benefits of this proposal, it might seem that it is not necessary to accept the simplicity doctrine in its entirety, insisting that God's various, apparently distinct, attributes are 'really' identical. As long as God *is* God's nature, we can deny that God is 'subject to' his nature. And we can do this, no matter how intricate and complex God's nature may be.

On the other hand, it might be argued that if God's nature is complex, then even if he is identical with his nature, he is *not* identical with the various *components* of his nature, thus leaving open the possibility that God is 'subject to' the attributes that make up his nature – including the attribute of goodness. According to St Thomas, this is the clear consequence of complexity: 'every composite is posterior to its component parts and is dependent on them' (*Summa Theologiae* III 7). If that is right, the identification of God with a complex and multifaceted nature fails to have the implication we are looking for, *viz*., that God is not 'subject to', not 'dependent on', anything distinct from himself. It is not at all clear, therefore, that the present proposal will work in isolation from something like the full Thomist doctrine of simplicity, according to which there is no multiplicity of any kind in God, not even a multiplicity of essential attributes.

The simplicity doctrine has been vigorously and intelligently defended by a number of philosophers, and this is not the place for a full-dress review of their arguments. I shall restrict myself here to a very brief sketch of my reasons for thinking (i) that God's nature must be comprised of a multiplicity of distinct attributes; and (ii) that whether or not God has a multiplicity of distinct essential attributes, he could not be identical with the attribute(s) that make up his nature.

How, for example, could God's power and goodness be identical? Surely these are distinct properties? Advocates of divine simplicity reply that power and goodness are not identical *in general*, but only in God. It is their perfect instantiations in God, who possesses both to the *maximum possible degree*, that are identical. Stump and Kretzmann are thinking along these lines when they compare (p. 357) God's nature to the summit of a mountain. While the

slopes of the mountain are distinct, they rise to the same peak. Similarly, Stump and Kretzman argue, *perfect* goodness may be identical with *perfect* power, even if less than perfect goodness is distinct from less than perfect power.

This is a striking image, but it does not convince me that the maximum degree of power (the 'perfect' power of God) can sensibly be identified with the maximum degree of goodness (the 'perfect' goodness of God). As we go up the mountain, after all, we get continually closer to the summit lying at the end of *all* the different slopes. If perfect goodness and perfect power were the very same property, then one would expect increasing degrees of power to be accompanied by increasing degrees of goodness. One would expect that, as one's power grew in the direction of unlimited power, one would automatically be closer to unlimited goodness as well. But unless we redefine 'power' in some eccentric way, this is very implausible. Our experience of the world tells us that greater power does not entail greater goodness. Indeed, there does not seem to be any correlation whatever between levels of power and goodness. (Or if there is a correlation, it is certainly not one that would favour the present proposal.)

No analogy should be pressed too far, however, and it may be thought that I have not taken into account the gulf that lies between absolute goodness and absolute power on the one hand and any finite degree of goodness or power on the other. It may be said that one does not really get any closer to bridging that gap as one becomes more powerful or more good – no matter how powerful or good a finite person becomes, he is always infinitely far from the perfect power and goodness of God. So perhaps power and goodness could be identical at their infinite maximum, even though there is no correlation between finite degrees of these properties.

But this response raises as many questions as it answers. If the gulf between God's goodness and power and ours is so great that one is not *more like* God when one becomes more good or more powerful, then what can be the meaning of these words when applied to God – and how is *that* meaning supposed to be related to the meaning of those same words when they are applied to finite persons? No doubt the Thomist doctrine of analogical predication is intended to deal with such worries, but an adequate treatment of that topic would take us too far afield.

So let us suppose, at least for the sake of argument, that we can sensibly identify all the attributes making up God's nature. As I indicated above, I believe that it is still very hard to see how God could be identical with his nature. The reason is that, on traditional assumptions about what God has done, he must have contingent as well as essential properties – whereas if he were identical with his nature, then he could have only essential properties.

Of course God might have contingent *extrinsic* properties. If he creates free persons who freely serve him but might not have, then being-served-by-those-free-persons is a contingent property of God. But a slightly modified form of the argument seems to me to be sound.

1. If God were identical with his nature, none of his intrinsic properties could be contingent[10]
2. But some of God's intrinsic properties are contingent
3. Therefore God is not identical with his nature.

The rationale for premise (1) is straightforward. A thing's nature is its essence – it is that property or set of properties which it has in every possible situation in which it exists. An *intrinsic* feature of a thing's *nature* can only be one or another of its *essential* properties. It follows that if God were identical with his nature, all of his intrinsic properties would be essential and thus not contingent.

A traditional theist will hardly want to deny premise (2). It is generally held that God did not have to create the universe, but if that is true, then God's having chosen to do so must be a contingent property of God. Now it is evident that – whatever account of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction we give – God's choosing to create a universe will have to be on the *intrinsic* side of that distinction. Since God's choosing to create a world is the cause of the world, it must in some sense be prior to the existence of the world. It cannot therefore be an extrinsic property that God has only in relation to an 'already' existent world. It follows that choosing to create must be both intrinsic and contingent, in which case God has at least one property that is both intrinsic and contingent.

These considerations seem to me to be conclusive. God is not identical with his nature, and we still lack a rationale for saying that God (unlike an uncaused finite person) is not 'subject to' his own nature. However, as I suggested earlier, there is one other possible rationale that must be considered.

Could God be responsible for his own nature?

If we could make sense of the idea that God, unlike the uncaused persons in group beta, is responsible for his own nature, then we could sensibly say that he, again unlike any merely uncaused person, is not 'subject to' his nature. But how could God be responsible for his own nature?

To give this question a bit of context, in the past the Church Fathers held that God was the absolute Creator of everything else – the visible *and the invisible*. A number of philosophers, most notably Alvin Plantinga, have taken this hint quite seriously, suggesting that even abstract objects like numbers

[10] See Stump and Kretzmann, p. 354.

and properties and propositions may in some sense be dependent on God's intellectual activity.[11]

In a recent article entitled 'Absolute Creation', Thomas Morris extends this view, which he calls 'theistic activism', to include God's very nature – i.e., the property of being God.[12] In that context, Morris argues that it is perfectly coherent to suppose that God is *causally* responsible for his own nature.

To give some idea of how this might work, Morris envisages a 'materialization machine' with the remarkable ability, when its knobs and dials are correctly positioned, to create things out of nothing. For example, the owner of the machine might use it to create a table, and then place the machine on the table. Or (p. 175) he might use the machine to replace its own parts, one after another, until all of them have been replaced:

> With this we come as close as we can to an analogy for what the activist claims about God. The machine, like God, is creating that on which it depends for its occurrent activity of creation. If the end-state of the replacement story is conceivable, if it is conceivable that the materialization machine be in this state at any time, it seems also conceivable that such an activity take place at every time, or eternally. And that is like what we have in the case of God.

What exactly is it that Morris thinks 'we have in the case of God', and how is it supposed to be like the case of the 'materialization machine'? Taken literally, the analogy suggests that God has always existed and has always acted in such a way as to guarantee his own *continued* existence. But apparently this is not what Morris means. One defect in the analogy, he says, is that the machine does not create its own nature, but only an *instantiation* of that nature.

Does Morris, then, think that God continually creates his own nature? But this will not do either. A nature is a property, and properties (as Morris understands them, anyway) do not have temporal duration. They may be instantiated by temporal beings but are not themselves temporal. So while it may make sense to say that God's nature will continue to be instantiated, it makes no sense to say that God's nature will continue to *exist*. Nothing can (or need) be done to guarantee the *continued* existence of God's nature.

Morris concedes, of course, that the materialization machine example is far from perfect as an analogy for 'what we have in the case of God', and he does not intend to put much weight on it. Perhaps God's relation to his own nature is unique, so that we should not expect to come up with any very

[11] Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Marquette UP, 1980), pp. 140–6. See also his 'How to be an Anti-Realist', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, 56 (1982), pp. 47–70.

[12] T. Morris, 'Absolute Creation', in his *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame UP, 1987), pp. 161–78.

good analogy for it. So let that pass. Unfortunately there is a much more serious objection to Morris' proposal, one that seems to me to be decisive. I think it can be shown that nothing could be the cause of its own nature.

A cause must in some sense be prior to its effect. I am not here invoking the commonly held view that causes must precede their effects in time. Even if simultaneous causation is possible, the causal relation is still asymmetric. The man seated on Kant's famous pillow is the cause of the depression in the pillow, and not the other way around. And even if God's causal activity is not temporally prior to the natures that it causes, the relation must be asymmetric. God causes them, and not the other way around.

It follows that if God causes his own nature, he must be causally prior to his own nature. This leads to the following embarrassing questions. How could God, *sans* nature, have the power to cause anything? How could a mere *haecceity* have the power to cause God's nature?

To put the same problem in a slightly different way, if God causes God's nature, then God, *qua* cause of God's nature, must have the power to cause that nature. The trouble is that God's power is itself one aspect of God's nature, and hence of the very thing being caused. It seems, therefore, that God's power must be *both* causally prior to *and* causally posterior to the creation of his own nature. Causally prior, in as much as the power to act must be prior to its exercise. Causally posterior, since this power is itself one aspect of the nature that God is supposed to cause.

In sum, it is hard to see how God could create anything without (already, prior to creating it) having a nature that makes it possible for him to create it. If, therefore, God causes his own nature, his nature must be at least part of its own cause, and the dread spectre of self-causation rears its ugly head.

Someone might perhaps distinguish between two divine natures, one that is 'posterior' and one that is 'prior' to the act of creation – a created nature and an uncreated one. Then the 'posterior' nature might be created in accordance with the requirements of the 'prior' nature without any objectionable causal loops.

I doubt that any such distinction can be made to work. For example, I doubt that it makes much sense to say that God (*qua* cause of his nature) is not omnipotent, even though he has the power to *make* himself omnipotent. (Evidently, there is nothing an omnipotent God could do that a God with the power to grant himself omnipotence could not do!)

But even if such a distinction could be made, it would not serve our purpose, which was to show how it could be that God is not 'subject to' his own nature, whether prior or posterior. All the same problems will come back to haunt us in connection with the 'causally prior' nature.

Similar difficulties emerge in connection with the moral aspect of God's nature. In accordance with Morris' proposal, let us suppose God *makes* his nature good. Could God have made his nature be anything other than good? It seems not. If he could have, then there are possible worlds in which God exists and his nature is not good. But then goodness could not be an essential property of God, and could not be said to be part of his *nature*, whether prior or posterior.

But the other alternative is equally unsatisfactory. If God could not have failed to make his nature good, we must ask why he could not. What makes it impossible for him to do so? At this point we cannot appeal to God's nature to explain the impossibility, since his nature is supposed to be the effect, not the cause, of his activity. But is not easy to see what other answer could be given.

For these reasons, I think that Morris' proposal will not help us out of our difficulty. God's creative activity cannot be causally prior to his nature, and so God cannot be the cause of, or responsible for, his nature.

V. CONCLUSION

If God is neither responsible for nor identical with his nature, it looks as if he is 'subject to' that nature, just as we are 'subject to' ours. From a libertarian point of view, it follows that God is not responsible for what flows with necessity from his nature. And this is so even if we deny that the principle of alternative possibilities is an essential element of libertarian freedom.

Our best attempt to reconcile the doctrine of essential goodness with the requirements of the free will defence must therefore be deemed a failure. Unless a better solution can be found, theists like Swinburne and Plantinga need to choose between the doctrine of essential goodness and the free will defence. Even philosophical theologians must not be permitted to have their cake and eat it.[13]

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