2025 TheoLogica
An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology
S. I. DIVINE PROVIDENCE AND MODELS OF THEISM
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v9i2.85953

Can Libertarian Free Will be Reconciled with Divine Providence?

KATHERIN ROGERS
University of Delaware
krogers@udel.edu

Abstract: I try to reconcile libertarian free will for created agents with a qualified understanding of divine providence. Divine providence is not absolute, since created agents have some say in how things go in the universe. But God has a great deal of providential control because, being eternal, He sees, and can act upon, all the moments of time including (what is to us) the future. An isotemporalist (eternalist, four-dimensionalist) analysis of time, on which all times are equally real, can make sense of this. But if reality is "already" all there for God, how can He act upon it to achieve His objectives? Two analogies help to answer this question; the Time Traveler and the Master Painter.

Keywords: Free Will, Libertarianism, Divine Foreknowledge, Divine Eternity, Isotemporalism

Introduction

I will argue that it is possible to reconcile libertarian free will for created agents with a very minimally qualified understanding of divine providence. The qualification is required because on libertarianism, at least as I shall understand it, the free choices of created agents are up to those agents themselves. Free choices are *a se.* That being the case, while God causes all that exists—all that has real ontological status—God does not cause all that happens. Thus divine providence is not absolute, since created agents have some say in how things go in the universe. But God has a great deal of providential control, especially because, being eternal, He knows, and can act upon, all the moments of time in the entire temporal span of the created universe,

including what is to us the future.[1] If created choices are truly up to created agents, then God, living "outside" of time, can know future free choices from His eternal perspective only by "seeing" them happen. And since all of the future history of our part of the universe is impacted by created free choices, in order to know the future in general, God must "see" it as it takes place. Making theoretical sense of this is best accomplished by adopting an isotemporalist analysis of the nature of time on which all times are equally real.[2] What some temporal perceiver at some given time considers past, present, or future, is relative to that perceiver at that time. Some argue that if God knows the future because it is present to His eternity, then this knowledge is useless. If reality is all there "already" for God to see, then He cannot act upon it to achieve His objectives. I will argue that this is false by appealing to two analogies—the Time Traveler and the Master Painter. My hope is to propose a coherent picture of a sovereign and eternal God interacting with His creation, which creation contains libertarian free agents.

By "divine providence" I will mean what I take traditional, classical theists to mean: God has a plan for the entire course of the history of our universe from beginning to end.[3] This universal plan includes divine plans for each individual. Moreover, God knows exactly how everything turns out. He has knowledge of everything at every moment of time that the universe exists. From our temporal perspective God has foreknowledge of all of the future. God knows today what you will do tomorrow, and God knows for every existent being what it will be up to for all the tomorrows. Since (as I take it) God is simple, His providence and His omniscience and His omnipotence are one and the same. In His one act He is knowing and causing everything that has ontological status as He realizes His plan

[1] It may be that there are many "universes"—discrete, closed causal systems—in addition to ours. I take it that, if that is the case, God knows and can act upon all the moments in every temporal universe. See my, "Classical Theism and the Multiverse" (2020).

[2] This theory is sometimes labelled "four-dimensionalism", but that is a poor title, since one might want to allow the possibility of immaterial beings—angels for example—which experience temporal sequence, but do not exist in the three dimensions of space. Moreover, possibly some things exist in more than three spatial dimensions and also across all equally existent times, such that "four-dimensionalism" would not capture their status *vis-à-vis* time. Sometimes the term "eternalism" is used, but that could suggest that the created, temporally extended universe co-exists "eternally" with God such that time in creation is something like divine eternity, and that is not the view.

[3] If there is no beginning or end, God has a plan for all the infinite times. If there are more universes than ours, then He has a plan for the entire course of the finite, or infinite, history of each and every one of them. The claims I make for God as the author of our universe should be held to apply to Him as the author of whatever universes there may be.

for our universe. Can this picture of God and His relationship to our universe be reconciled with libertarian free will for human beings? Let us try.

1. Libertarian Freedom

We need a carefully developed theory of libertarian free will.[4] To appreciate the motives for adopting libertarianism it helps to start with a quick glance at the main alternative, that is compatibilism. For our purposes compatibilism will mean roughly the view that human choices are free in some important way, even though they are determined by causes for which the agent is not responsible. We will be most interested in what can be called "theist compatibilism". To appreciate theist compatibilism, it is important to get clear on a standard distinction in classical theism, the distinction between primary and secondary causation. Secondary causation is the causal relationships between creatures. It is the sort of causation that science observes. Creatures do not bring anything into being ex nihilo. Creatures just rearrange what is already there in the universe. For example, your parents did not bring you into being out of nothing. They rearranged some material elements that were already there, natural principles of cause and effect took their course, and here you are. It is God, as the primary cause, Who keeps everything in being ex nihilo from moment to moment; all of the entities with all of their powers and abilities. On theist compatibilism even the acts of choice of human agents are caused by God as the primary cause, but, as long as those choices are produced through the desiring and willing of the human agent himself as the secondary cause, they are free. Some of the greatest and most influential Christian philosophers have been theist compatibilists. St. Augustine is certainly one in his later, anti-Pelagian, works, and perhaps he was a theist compatibilist all along. He certainly claims as much in his *Reconsiderations*.[5] St. Thomas Aquinas, too, adopts this position.[6] A main advantage of holding theist compatibilism is that it flows seamlessly from attributing absolute providence to God; God's plan includes everything, even human choices over which He exercises complete control.

The uncomfortable entailments of theist compatibilism explain the motives for the Christian philosopher to adopt libertarianism instead. First there is the problem of sin. On theist compatibilism God is the primary cause of the act of sin. God is not *at fault* of course, since the human agent's sin is part of the divine plan. Still this is a

[4] The theory I propose here is based on the work of St. Anselm of Canterbury. See my, *Anselm on Freedom* (2008) and *Freedom and Self-creation: Anselmian Libertarianism* (2015).

[5] Book 1, Chapter 9. See my, "Augustine's Compatibilism," (2004).

[6] *Summa contra gentiles* Book 3. 66–67 and 88–89, *Summa theologiae* (ST) 1 Q. 105 arts. 4–5.

troubling position. For one thing, the theist compatibilist cannot invoke the Free Will Defense to deal with the problem of moral evil. Why does God permit human wickedness with all of the misery that it causes? The Free Will Defense says that the wickedness is the product of robust human freedom, and God could not prevent the wickedness without interfering with the freedom. The freedom is such a great good that He chooses not to interfere. But on theist compatibilism, God could ensure that every human agent always chose the good, without interfering with their compatibilist freedom. So no Free Will Defense for theist compatibilists. Indeed all the moral wickedness and the misery it causes are intrinsic parts of the divine plan. In the final analysis the wickedness and the misery *should* happen. This position has various worrisome ethical and psychological consequences. Moreover, it is part of the Christian world view that God holds human agents responsible for their choices. He praises and blames us for what we choose. But if He is ultimately the cause of our choices, it is puzzling that He can hold us responsible for what He has made us do. This is especially difficult given the doctrine of hell. Can God be so unjust as to send us to hell for the choices He caused us to make?

One might circumvent this problem by proposing universalism: God sees to it that everyone gets to heaven in the end. It would be pleasant to believe that this is the case. However, universalism runs counter to traditional Church teaching and is hard to square with Scripture. Moreover, even supposing the ultimate happy ending that universalism posits, theist compatibilism proposes a picture of God and creation that might strike one as unpleasantly reminiscent of a puppet show. It is a complex and often nasty drama wherein God ultimately plays all the parts. Presumably all the created wickedness and pain and suffering contribute to the overall story that God is telling Himself, but it still seems rather hard luck on the created characters performing the narrative before everyone achieves eternal beatitude at the final curtain. And if God will conduct everyone into heaven in any case it is hard to see why God puts us through the wringer in the meanwhile. The difficulties with theist compatibilism make libertarianism more attractive.

I understand libertarianism to be rooted in two main criteria. First, if we suppose that it is just for God to hold us responsible for our choices, then those choices must come from us and not from God. The free choice of a created agent must be *a se*, from himself. This is how we can truly be images of God, children rather than slaves or puppets. But how is this possible in a universe where everything that has ontological status is caused by God? God causes us as creatures, including our ability to choose, and even the desires which motivate us. What is left for the free agent to contribute? I propose, following Anselm, that God has created the human will such that our process of willing is a "parsimonious agent causation". In order for us to choose

from ourselves God provides us with conflicting, morally significant motives. To offer a simple description, assume that some agent, S, is struggling to pursue two, conflicting, god-given desires, A and B. At some point S "perwills" A. The term "perwill" (*pervolo*) is coined by Anselm. It means to will something beyond the point of desire such that that willing becomes the intention. If S perwills A, then the conflicting desire for B ceases to be viable. The point where S perwills A and no longer desires B is the choice. This choice is a "thin" event, such that its ontological status is entirely dependent upon, or reducible to, the agent, the agent's will, and the desires. The claim is that "thin" events are not independent beings such that they must owe their existence to God.[7]

2. The Ontological Status of Choice

The question of what sort of ontological status to ascribe to events is a vexed one, but at least arguably there are events with no genuine "being" of their own. For example, suppose you have two runners in a race. One has a head start, but the other catches up and passes him. Clearly the runners have ontological status. A fairly liberal approach to ontology could allow that the runners' powers of running, and perhaps even the acts of running, are "things" of a sort. But it begins to seem excessive to insist that the "passing" is a being with ontological status above and beyond the runners, their abilities to run, and their actual running. It may be that the event of the passing happens at a given time, such that we can pinpoint it. And it may be that the event of the passing is extremely important in the lives of the runners. Perhaps the one who overtakes the other wins the race and the prize of a million dollars. Still, the "passing" itself can properly be considered a "thin" event, such that it has no independent ontological status.

As I read him, Anselm's view is that a libertarian free choice is a "thin" event analogous to the one runner passing the other. In a choice, the agent perwills one desire such that it "passes" the opposing desire and the latter ceases to be viable. The choice may happen at a particular time, and it may be extremely important in the life of the agent, but we do not have to ascribe to it any independent ontological status. The process of choosing can be labelled agent causation because it is up to the agent alone which desire is perwilled. But it is a parsimonious agent causation because it introduces no new "thing"—no new entity with independent ontological status—into the process.[8] God causes every*thing* that exists in the process of

[7] See my (2015); for "perwilling" see 93–100; for "thin" events see 102–109.

[8] See my (2015, 102–109). An extended defense of this approach lies beyond the scope of the present paper.

choosing. God causes the existence of the agent, the agent's will, and the mutually exclusive desires for A and for B that the agent is entertaining. But the choice, the perwilling, is not a new being, and God does not cause it.

3. Open Options and Subsequent Necessity

In order for the created agent to choose with aseity, he must, in some sense, be able to choose between open options. But it is important to appreciate what sort of options are required. We have imagined a human agent, S, torn between his desire for A and his desire for B. The agent's, S's, perwilling A must not be causally necessitated. In terms of everything about S's situation and abilities, S could have perwilled B. In addition to not being *causally* necessitated, S's choice must not be necessitated by any factors not ultimately deriving from S. Libertarianism, as I understand it, entails what can be called the "grounding" principle. If, to be a libertarian free choice, S's choice must be *a se*, then I take it that it follows that the truth of a proposition about the choice like, "S freely chooses A at time T" must be grounded in (dependent upon) S actually choosing A at time T. (I do not think I need any well-developed or fine-grained analysis of what I mean by "grounding" here in order to proceed with the explanation.) And since the truth of any proposition expressing a libertarian free choice is grounded in the actual choice itself, anyone's knowledge of the choice must derive from the actual choice.[9] This rules out the possibility of Molinist counterfactuals of freedom. I take it that there is no truth about what some agent, actual or non-actual, *would* choose in some non-actual situation. On the Molinist account an actual agent's "libertarian" free choice must conform to the counterfactual of freedom expressing the choice, which counterfactual simply exists as a sort of abstract object over which neither the agent nor God has any control. If, according to this Molinist theory, an agent's choice is necessitated, since it must *be* what the counterfactual of freedom says it is, I would not take this to be a libertarian free choice, even if it is not *causally* necessitated. Molinism, then, is not a viable approach to reconciling libertarian free will with divine providence. On Molinism (at least as it is set out in the contemporary discussion) God is radically limited by the set of independent abstracta with which He must work and created choices are radically limited by those same abstracta to which they must conform.

But there is one species of necessity that can attach to a libertarian free choice. Boethius calls it a "conditional" necessity. Following Anselm, I will use the term

[9] See my (2015, 109–116).

"subsequent" necessity. It is subsequent in that it follows upon the fact. So say that S made a libertarian free choice, opting for A yesterday. Almost everyone agrees that the past is fixed. If S chose A yesterday, nothing can be done by anyone today—and that includes God—to make it the case that S did not choose A yesterday. It is necessary, by subsequent necessity, that S chose A yesterday. But subsequent necessity does not conflict with libertarian free choice because it is a necessity that arises from the making of the free choice. S's choice of A yesterday is fixed and could not be otherwise, but it is S himself who fixed it. Almost everyone agrees that the present is fixed in the same way as the past, and so subsequent necessity also attaches to events in the present. If S makes a libertarian free choice for A right now, nothing anyone can do can make it the case that S is not making a libertarian free choice for A right now. It is subsequently necessary that S is choosing A right now, and S himself is the source of the subsequent necessity. We do not worry about a subsequent necessity attaching to events in the past and the present. But what about the future and God's providential foreknowledge?

4. Isotemporalism

We are on the way to reconciling divine providence, including foreknowledge, with human libertarian free will, but we need two more pieces of the theoretical puzzle. We need to accept that God is eternal, and we need to adopt the isotemporal theory of time. My understanding of divine eternity includes the view that God is simple and immutable. There can be no temporal sequence in His life. How can a simple and immutable God interact with a changing creation? Isotemporalism answers that question. All times are equally real. There is no ontologically privileged "now". What any temporal perceiver at any given time views as past, present, and future is relative to that perceiver at that time. So, take a time traveler (TT, whom we will meet again later). Say that TT travels instantaneously from t1 to t20, which is 20 years in the future from t1. When TT is at t20, t20 is the present to her and t1 is in the past. If TT travels from t1 to t –20, where t –20 is 20 years in the past from t1, then t –20 becomes the present to her and t1 is the future. But t1 and t20 and t –20 are all equally real. Isotemporalism need not conflict with the claim that there is an "arrow of time", nor need it undermine temporal relationships. There can still be events happening before, at the same time as, and after others. There can be a robust temporal sequence, it is just that all of the elements of the temporal order exist equally. The analogy with space can be helpful. As spatially located creatures we inevitably find ourselves "here" rather than "there", but it would be a mistake to assume that "here" is all that exists because "here" is all that we can access.

Since it is God's immediate knowledge that causes reality, God sees things as they are. If ours is an isotemporalist universe, then God sees all the times of our world as "there" for Him. Change occurs, since things can be one way at t1 and another at t2, but the whole of the spatio-temporal universe does not change. And so God, in His simple and immutable act, is knowing and causing all the times and all the existent entities that they contain. And this is how He can have knowledge (we should no longer refer to it as *fore*knowledge) of our libertarian free choices. If S chooses A at t1, the grounding principle entails that the truth of "S chooses A at t1", and anyone's knowledge that S chooses A at t1, depends upon S actually choosing A at t1. It is always true in the isotemporal universe that S chooses A at t1, and God always knows that S chooses A at t1. It is necessary, by subsequent necessity, that S chooses A at t1, but it is S himself that introduces the necessity by choosing A at t1.

5. Foreknowledge and Time Travel

The grounding principle entails that God's knowledge of libertarian free choices must be based on the actual occurrence of those choices. I have proposed that if God eternally "sees" all times because they are equally real and are "there" for Him to "see", then He can have complete knowledge, including what is to us *fore*knowledge, of all that happens in the universe. Some have argued that if God knows what happens because it happens then His knowledge comes "too late" for Him to affect the course of events, and so divine knowledge of all that happens at all times does not allow any more scope for divine providence than if God were in time, learning what happens as time goes by like the rest of us. And certainly God's eternal knowledge of how things are does not allow Him to *change* anything. Logic entails that what happens, happens. Even if God were in time that would be the case. Almost everyone grants that the past and the present are fixed, and if the future does not yet exist, then there's nothing to change. The events of the world's history cannot be undone, but they can be brought about.[10] The opponent, I take it, argues that God's having immediate knowledge of all times, and causal access to all times, does not enhance divine providence.

In order to contest this claim, let me first suggest an analogy based on time travel. Indeed, I believe I can propose a plausible principle, so long as it is acceptable to leave it a bit rough. The principle is this: If a time traveler (TT) can use her knowledge of (what is to her) the future to bring about a state of affairs she desires

[10] David Hunt makes this case in several papers, including the influential, "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge," (1993). I add to Hunt's arguments by offering a defense of the possibility of causal loops and by emphasizing the distinction between the temporal and eternal perspectives.

in (what is to her) the future, then God can use His eternal knowledge to bring about states of affairs that He desires. Here is an example where TT can use her knowledge of the future to bring about the desired future situation. TT travels from t1, 2023, let's say, to t20, that is 2043. She is pleased to see that her son Patrick, now in his 50's, is very wealthy. He is a bit surprised to see her, since she died in 2033, but (having been properly brought up on science fiction and theology) he becomes convinced that it is indeed Mom who has come from 2023. TT asks Pat how he became wealthy, and he explains that TT invested in Galactic Widgets (GW) back in 2023 when the company was just getting going, and in the intervening 20 years it has been the biggest success in stock market history, hence his wealth in 2043. Happy to make her son wealthy, TT returns to 2023 and invests in GW. She has used her knowledge of what occurs in the future to bring about what she wants to have occur in the future. If TT can do it, why not God? Change the story a little. Mom is now not a time traveller. It is God Who knows that Patrick is wealthy in 2043 because Mom invested in GW in 2023. God wants Patrick to be wealthy in 2043. He knows that it was an irresistible desire to invest in GW that caused Mom to invest in GW in 2023, and so God implants that irresistible desire to invest in GW in Mom's mind in 2023. (We are not yet considering scenarios including libertarian free choices.) God brings about Patrick's wealth by acting upon events 20 years earlier.[11]

6. Causal Loops

One might raise the objection that the time travel story entails causal loops which could infect the divine analogue as well, and causal loops are to be avoided. That could mean that invoking the time travel principle to support the scope of divine providence is a failure. I agree that TT's story does involve causal loops, but I reject the thought that causal loops must always be avoided.[12] In TT's story one causal loop could go like this: Take the belief that GW stock soars after 2023. Call that belief B. Patrick holds B in 2043. Pat wouldn't have been interested in the stock market if he hadn't gotten rich, and so Pat's holding B in 2043 is caused by Mom investing in 2023 and the fact that since then the stock has soared. (To make the example even

[11] Someone might argue that, since God knows eternally that He causes Mom to invest, He cannot deliberate about whether or not to cause Mom to invest. I agree. On the portrait of God that I am endorsing God is eternal and immutable in such a way that He does not debate about what to do. He inevitably does the best in His one, timeless, act of being. See my, "An Anselmian Approach to Divine Simplicity" (2020, 308–322, at 317–318).

[12] For more on the possibility of causal loops in a theist universe see Jeremy W. Skrzypek, "Causal Time Loops and the Immaculate Conception," (2020).

more loopy we can suppose that it was Mom's investment that enabled the fledgling company to survive.) But it was holding B in 2023 that caused Mom to invest in 2023. And it was Pat's holding B in 2043 that produced B in Mom's mind when, as TT, she met him in 2043. Pat's holding B in 2043 caused Mom's holding B in 2023 (She brought B back from 2043) which caused Pat's holding B in 2043. But this seems to say that it was Pat's holding B in 2043 that provides an ineradicable link in the chain of causal explanation for Pat's holding B in 2043. But can an event be explained by itself? That seems to be an explanatory failure. Perhaps this is clearer with a very simple example: TT travels from 2023 to 2043 and Patrick, in 2043, gives her a coin. She travels back to 2023 and gives the coin to Patrick, who is 20 years younger. He keeps the coin for twenty years and gives it back to her in 2043. Here the very existence of the coin seems obviously inexplicable.

In each example above there is a secondary causal story to tell about how our characters come by their beliefs or the coin. At each step in the stories the individual causal link seems unproblematic. There is nothing incoherent about one person imparting a belief, or a coin, to another. That A causes B is not a worry. The worry arises when it is claimed that B in turn causes A. When the loop is introduced, the secondary causal stories seem woefully inadequate. Surely in order to explain the existence of a coin we need to suppose that it was minted from metal which was dug out of the ground where it had been formed by geologic events and etc., back to the dawn of time. The formation of beliefs is much more complex, but presumably there is something suspicious about a belief which has itself in its causal history. That the belief case presents a problematic loop seems less clear to me than that the coin case does, but even in the coin case I think we can defend the possibility of such a situation. And that is because, at least in the universe where reconciling free will and divine foreknowledge is a concern, there is more than one sort of causation. It is true that we cannot offer an adequate causal explanation on the level of secondary causation, where we are limited to appealing to created causes which can only rearrange what is already there in the universe. The coin exists without the mint and the mine as part of its causal history. But nonetheless its existence might be fully explained by God's causing it as the primary cause. Usually God maintains the system of secondary causation, running as we expect it to, but sometimes He can and may work a miracle, and perhaps that coin is such a miracle. Similarly with TT's belief that investing in GW will make her son rich.

Invoking divine primary causation to remedy a failure in the explanatory power of secondary causes is a standard move.[13] Secondary causes can only rearrange what

[13] For example, we might plausibly read Aquinas's Second Way as doing just that.

is already there in the universe. We can suppose that the past of our created universe is either infinite or finite. If it is infinite, then, in terms of the temporal succession of secondary causes, the things that exist today can be said to be caused by the things that existed yesterday. What existed yesterday rearranged things to produce what exists today. That is an acceptable, but incomplete, explanation for any given link in the causal chain. Assuming an infinite number of days in the past, we are faced with an infinite regress and that means that, in terms of secondary causation, we do not have a complete explanation for the things that exist today. We need to posit God, the primary cause, to explain how it is that the infinite series of secondary causes exists. If the past is finite then we can trace the sequence of secondary causes from the present back to that first moment, and it is even more obvious that a primary cause is required to explain the existence of the series of causes that explains, on a secondary level, the things we see around us now. So with our TT stories we do have causal loops of secondary causes, but each step in the loop has an explanation in terms of the secondary cause that precedes it, and the whole loop has an explanation in terms of primary causation. TT's knowledge of the future allows her to bring about a situation she desires, causal loops notwithstanding. I do not see that any further worry is introduced if we set aside the time travelling and say that it is God Who observes Patrick being rich in 2043, finds it a desirable situation, and so produces Mom's desire to invest in 2023. God might produce Mom's desire through secondary causes, or immediately *ex nihilo*. There is still a loop since God's knowledge of, and desire for, Pat's situation in 2043 is the reason He gives Mom the desire to invest which produces Pat's situation in 2043, but I have tried to show that the existence of loops is not enough to undo a theory.

The critic may still insist that causal or explanatory loops are impossible. But before we give up on the time travel analogy or, worse, on the usefulness to God of divine foreknowledge of free choices, we should press the critic on just *why* they are impossible. And first, the critic should probably explain his understanding of causes or explanations. There is robust debate about what counts as a cause or an explanation. David Hume suggested that our concept of "cause" entails that what we think of as the cause must precede the effect temporally. On that understanding the "causal" relations in the time travel stories I have told are indeed impossible. But Hume is wrong, as a matter of intellectual history. Many philosophers propose less restrictive ideas of causation and would object to limiting our understanding of causation so severely. In the discussion above we have already distinguished two very different kinds of cause, primary and secondary. Might there not be, among the many and varied theories, adequate analyses of "cause" or "explanation" that are friendly to at least some instances of causal or explanatory loops?

And then the critic needs to spell out his understanding of "possible". Does "possible" mean *logically* possible; not containing any obvious logical contradictions? The time travel stories I have told above are strange, but I do not see that they propose A and not-A in the same way at the same time. Sometimes people use the term "possible" to refer to what could happen within the framework of current science; something is possible if it is in accordance with the entities and laws we discern in the physical universe. It may be that time travel defies the laws of physics, and my time travel stories, with their causal loops, are scientifically impossible. But that understanding of "possible" is not appropriate in the present context. We are talking about a larger universe, containing God, and so "possibility" is not limited to what can occur in conformity to the entities and laws of science. Sometimes people take the test of possibility to be whether or not a situation is imaginable. I take it that the reader has been able to follow the events in the time travel stories told above, so loops are imaginable in that sense. Whether or not causal or explanatory loops are possible on some understanding of metaphysical possibility is the question at issue, but without a well-developed argument to the contrary, it begs the question to insist that they are not possible.

And notice that there may be causal or explanatory loops in ordinary life. The last verse of the nursery rhyme, "Mary Had a Little Lamb" explains that the lamb loves Mary because Mary loves the lamb. Suppose there were a subsequent verse that explained that Mary loves the lamb because the lamb loves her. And suppose—expanding the rhyme into a story—their mutual love grew simultaneously, due to their simultaneous recognition of one another's love. That seems to be a causal loop, but prima facie it does not seem absurd or impossible. If one insisted that causes must precede their effects temporally, then one would reject the story, but why subscribe to such a narrow understanding of causation? Or take the scene in Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* where the Little Prince visits Asteroid 327 on which a drunkard lives. The Little Prince asks him why he drinks. He says he drinks to forget. But what does he want to forget? That he is ashamed. And what is he ashamed of? That he drinks. The Little Prince concludes that grown-ups are strange. And we may think the drunkard is behaving foolishly or irrationally. But we understand his explanation for his behavior. The sad causal loop makes sense psychologically. So even setting aside the colorful situation involved in time travel, I believe we can discover causal or explanatory loops which do not strike us as absurd or impossible. The burden of proof is on the critic to convince us that causal or explanatory loops are impossible. Unless that burden is met I stand by my time travel stories and my principle that if a time traveler can use knowledge of the future to achieve some desired effect in the future, then so can God.

7. Foreknowledge and Free Will

But the picture gets more complicated if we add in free will. Suppose TT travels to 2043. Patrick is choosing how to employ his wealth. TT observes him freely choosing to give to a charity of which TT approves.[14] TT happily travels back to 2023 and makes the investment which leads to Patrick's wealth and facilitates his choice. TT's action in 2023 does not *cause* Patrick's choice since, by hypothesis, it is a free choice. But TT's investment leads to the wealth which makes the choice possible. But now suppose that TT observes Patrick freely choosing to use his wealth badly, to support a crooked politician for his own selfish purposes, let's say. TT's first thought is to rush back to 2023 and NOT invest in Galactic Widgets. That way Patrick never gets rich and does not have the opportunity to make the bad choice. But she realizes immediately that that plan is doomed to failure. What happens, happens and cannot be undone.[15] For TT the future after 2043 is epistemically open, so there is nothing irrational in her trying to bring about a future from 2043 in which the harm done by Patrick's choice is minimized. Perhaps she travels forward to 2044, just before the next election, and reveals some dirt on the crooked politician so that he is not elected. But now it seems that the analogy between TT's ability to bring about a desirable future based on foreknowledge and God's ability to do so begins to come apart. In dealing with Patrick's bad choice, it made sense for TT to travel into the further future—2044—rather than back to 2023 because she knew what happened in 2023 and knew it could not be changed. Her lack of knowledge of the future from 2043 made it reasonable for her to travel forward and try to bring about what she wanted. But God knows and causes all times and all that they contain immediately in His one, simple, eternal act of knowing and causing. If He knows what happens because it happens how can He use that knowledge to bring about His providential plan?

8. The Master Painter Analogy

I think we can make some sense of the claim that God's eternal knowledge allows Him great control by emphasizing the radical difference between God's eternal perspective *vis-à-vis* the created universe and our perspective as temporal beings, even as time travelling temporal beings. To get a feel for this difference I propose an

[14] In fact TT cannot observe this since TT cannot read minds, but set that aside for the sake of the example.

[15] There will have to be a story to tell about *why* TT invests in Galactic Widgets in 2023, now that she has seen the bad use Patrick made of his wealth, but the clever story-teller could come up with something.

image which is fanciful, but it might help. Imagine a "Master Painter" (MP) who is producing a gigantic mural. He will do almost all the work, but he has created an army of tiny helpers to whom he has given free will. The tiny helpers think of themselves as little points, so we will call them dots. MP provides all the paint and most of the content of the mural, but the dots are able to contribute in a small way to the overall painting. MP has given each of them some paint, and they each add a tiny bit to the picture by moving slightly this way or that as, from the dots' perspective, the coming into being of the mural progresses. From the dots' perspective the mural is coming to be made from left to right. It is constituted by long, thin threads each stretching from top to bottom. At each moment, from the dots' perspective, a new thread is added to the right, so that the left has been growing. The dots think of the already produced left as the unchangeable past. Each thread as it is added is their present, in which they can act freely to contribute their mite of paint to the whole. From the dots' perspective it is the present thread they are on that has ontological reality, although they tend to think of the already painted left-hand threads as real and fixed. New threads come from the right which the dots think of as non-existent. Most of each thread has already been covered in paint by MP, but MP has left a bit of each thread for the dots to paint. From the dots' perspective, as they occupy a given present thread, they have very little grasp of what the left side of the mural, the past, looks like, even though it is already painted. And they have almost no idea at all of what the right side, the future, will look like. We may add to the imagining that MP has given them hints about what the right side will look like, and has also tried to explain to them the best ways to move to contribute to the mural, and has offered glimpses of his vision for the finished product. But the dots, given their limited perspective, (and, we might add, an unruly nature) have no grasp of what the complete mural will look like.

Now imagine that MP sees the mural from a very different perspective than do the dots, and that it is MP who sees the mural as it actually is because he is causing it. All the threads that go to make up the mural exist equally. The whole mural is complete from left to right. The "dots" are not really dots since each "dot" exists across numerous threads. They are little ribbons whose lives begin at some thread and extend in a rightward direction.[16] (We can allow that there is something about

[16] It seems fitting to me to say that the ribbons perdure across the threads. I am imagining different ribbons originating at different threads and then extending rightwards. To make it analogous to the Christian universe, the mural should proceed infinitely towards the right, since the Christian afterlife is temporal (though perhaps time on the other side is different from our time?) and unending. I call the tiny helpers "ribbons" rather than the more standard "worms" because ribbons seem intrinsically

the arrangement of the painting that grounds an "arrow of time".[17]) The most amazing thing about the mural is that MP painted the whole thing, incorporating the minute contributions of the "ribbons", as we should now call them, *at once*. In an instant. In that single instant MP paints the vast majority of the mural and creates the ribbons and provides them with paint and advice. And MP's instantaneous painting takes into account the little dabs freely made by the ribbons. MP has an excellent eye for what the order and the beauty of the whole should look like. If a disobedient ribbon produces a series of dabs of ugly mustard yellow, MP sees to it that the dabs are the centers of flowers. And if a ribbon adds a spot that, considered in itself, could mar the balance of the whole, MP adds whatever is necessary to the left or the right of the spot, to incorporate that spot into the overall order and beauty of the mural. MP is responding to the ribbons' work, but the ribbons' dabbing and MP's response, and every action and reaction involving MP, the ribbons, and the whole mural, is simultaneous and instantaneous. With immediate access to the whole mural at once MP can ensure that it is basically as he intends, even taking into account the free activities of the ribbons. MP is not the source of the placement of every single speck of paint on every thread, since he chose to create ribbons who could act freely. But he produces, in an instant, a painting that accords with his vision for the order and beauty of the whole. There could be logical sequence. The reason MP painted this over here to the left was because a ribbon produced a spot over there somewhat to the right. And MP's work on the left is intended to fit the spot on the right into the overall vision. From the perspective of a ribbon (seeing himself as a dot) it might look like MP had added paint to the "past" of the mural due to his knowledge of the "future" of the mural. And, then, since the "future"—the righthand side—is built upon the "past"—the lefthand side—we have a loop. The painting on the left partially brings about the painting on the right, but it was the ribbon's free contribution to the painting on the right that explains some of MP's painting on the left.

The analogy, of course, is that MP is like God. The mural represents the history of our created world, and it all exists at once to suggest the isotemporal theory of time. The ribbons are like human agents, whose lives, in an isotemporal universe,

---

more pleasant. Also, "worms" suggests that MP might be contemptuous of his creatures. I do not want my analogy to connote that God despises us.

[17] The mural is supposed to be analogous to our created universe, so a more complete description of the mural would propose some sort of causal connections between the entities and events depicted. As a rule things on the left would serve as (secondary) causes for things on the right. But offering a thorough description of the mural would be time consuming and is probably more than is needed for my suggestion of how an eternal God interacts with free creatures in a temporal universe.

are extended across the moments of time at which they exist. The point is to suggest that divine access to the entire expanse of space-time in an unextended eternal present would allow God to "observe" the free choices of created agents and would also allow much more scope for providential action than would limiting God to a location in time. That MP's producing the mural could really be instantaneous is probably unimaginable for us. We are temporal creatures and cannot help but think of things happening in temporal sequence. But unimaginable is not logically contradictory. And even if there is something logically contradictory about a "Master Painter" producing a mural instantaneously, that would be a limitation of the analogy. It would not follow that God cannot see and act upon the entire isotemporal universe "at once". Created agents with libertarian free will can, I believe, be causally efficacious citizens of a universe in which God has knowledge of all of time, He has a plan for the whole, and He executes this plan in one eternal and immutable act.[18]

Bibliography

Hunt, David. 1993. "Divine Providence and Simple Foreknowledge." *Faith and Philosophy* 10: 394–416. https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19931036.

Rogers, Katherin. 2004. "Augustine's Compatibilism." *Religious Studies* 40 (4): 415–35. https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441250400722X.

Rogers, Katherin. 2008. *Anselm on Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199231676.001.0001.

Rogers, Katherin. 2015. *Freedom and Self-Creation: Anselmian Libertarianism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198743972.001.0001.

Rogers, Katherin. 2020a. "Classical Theism and the Multiverse." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 88: 23–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-019-09731-0.

Rogers, Katherin. 2020b. "An Anselmian Approach to Divine Simplicity." *Faith and Philosophy* 37: 308–22. https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2020.37.3.3.

[18] This article is a product of the Project "Providence and Free Will in the Models of Classical Theism and Analytic Theism" (PID2021-122633NB-100), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of the Government of Spain. I would like to thank participants in the Project's 2023 Seminar and also anonymous reviewers for this journal for helpful criticism.

Skrzypek, Jeremy W. 2020. "Causal Time Loops and the Immaculate Conception." *Journal of Analytic Theology* 8: 321–43. https://doi.org/10.12978/jat.2020-8.0904-65181010.

Published Online First: August 30, 2025