

If God brought about the Big Bang, did he do that before the Big Bang?

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Uploaded to <http://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de> on 29.8.2009

Abstract:

If God brings about an event in the universe, does it have a preceding cause? The standard answer is: yes, it is caused by a divine willing. I propose an alternative view, based on a certain non-compatibilist solution of the dilemma of free will: God’s actions, unlike human actions, are not initiated by willings, undertakings, or tryings, but God brings about the intended event directly. I explain what ‘bringing about directly’ means.

Keywords: divine action, agent causation, causation

1. The divine willing view

Assume that the universe had a beginning, and the beginning was caused by God. Was there then an event that caused the beginning of the universe? More generally, *if God causes an event E beginning at t , is there then an event C beginning before t which causes E ?* The usual answer is yes, I shall argue that the true answer is no. God can bring about events in the universe so that they have no preceding cause.

The usual conception we find, for example, in Hofmann & Rosenkrantz’s book *Divine Attributes*:

Necessarily, if an agent, A, intentionally [...] brings about an event [...], then A performs such an action either by deciding (or choosing) to do so or by endeavor-

ing (or willing) to do so. Thus, if God exists, then he performs actions [...] via his decisions or endeavors. (Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 2002, 103)

The authors proceed to argue that to endeavour something is to engage in a 'volitional activity', and 'a volitional activity of God would be an *intrinsic change* in him' (103f). As only things in time can change, God is therefore in time. Similarly, Richard Swinburne argues that God is in time because, as causes are earlier than their effects, God's 'acting must be prior to the effects that his action causes' (Swinburne 1993, 216). Also Quentin Smith assumes that there would be divine willings if there were a God, when he investigates 'the relation between [God's] act of willing (an event) and the beginning of the universe (another event)' (Smith 1996, 170).

These authors assume that every action, at least every free action, involves an action event in the agent's mind which causes the intended event. Defenders of agent causation call it an 'undertaking' (Chisholm) or 'trying' (Swinburne), others call it a 'volition', 'endeavouring', or 'willing'. From this assumption it follows that *if God acts, then there are divine willings which cause the events God brings about*. I call this the divine willing view. On this view, if the universe began with the Big Bang then there is a divine undertaking which began before the Big Bang and which caused the Big Bang.

In this article I propose an alternative to this view. To explain and defend it I shall first offer a solution to the dilemma of free will. Then I shall explicate some differences between human and divine action and defend the view that there are no divine willings and that the beginning of the universe had no preceding cause. More generally, my thesis is that God can bring about events in the universe so that they have no preceding cause. This thesis is independent of the assumption that the universe began with the Big Bang and that the universe had a beginning. I am presupposing that God is in time and that there was a time before the beginning of the universe. (For more on this, see Swinburne 1993, ch. 12.) On the view that God is outside time, it would be clear that an event brought about by God does not have a preceding cause. However, my thesis

2. The dilemma of free will

The dilemma is that the following two sentences seem to be true:

- A. If an action has a full cause, then it is not free.
- B. If an action does not have a full cause, then it happens by chance and is therefore not up to the agent and thus not free.

I shall present an incompatibilist account of free actions which rejects (B). (A) means that if an action was the result of a deterministic (or at least non-chancy) causal process, then it was not free. More precisely we should say that it was not free if it was determined before the beginning of the action or if it was the result of a causal process into which the agent could not intervene. The action was not free then because the agent was forced to do it. (B) means that an event is either the result of a deterministic process or of an indeterministic, chancy process, and that an action which was the result of an indeterministic process was not free because the agent did not have *control* over the occurrence of the action and the action is not done for reasons. An action can only be free if it does not occur by chance, if it is up to the agent whether it occurs, and if the agent can do, or not do it, in the light of reasons. If both these thoughts, (A) and (B), were correct, then free actions would be impossible.

Compatibilists reject (A). They hold that free will is compatible with the doctrine of determinism that every event has a deterministic preceding cause and so is the result of a deterministic causal process. One motivation for compatibilism is that we have bodies which are part of a physical universe and which are governed by laws of nature. The intended results of our actions are results of causal processes in our brain, nerves, and muscles. These processes are governed by laws of nature. Many philosophers, because of their conception of laws of nature and of matter, therefore think that our actions too are the results of causal processes. As God does not have a body, this is not a reason for accepting a compatibilist account of divine action. If God's actions are the results of processes in his mind, then these are immaterial processes, not governed by laws of nature.

Another possible motivation for compatibilism is assumption (B) that if an action is not the result of a deterministic process, then it is the result of an indeterministic process and hence occurs by chance and is not under the control of the agent. This is not the place to criticise the various compatibilist proposals. Let me just present an incompatibilist alternative which rejects (B) and in this respect makes the refuge to compatibilism unnecessary. As I have argued elsewhere (Wachter 2009, ch. 7.6) that free actions are compatible with determinism rightly understood, I am reluctant to call my account 'incompatibilist', but it is informative to call it 'incompatibilist' because it contradicts determinism as usually understood as the doctrine that every event is the result of a deterministic causal process.

The dilemma of free will arises through the assumption, which we can call *mechanicism*, that an event is either the result of a deterministic process or the result of an indeterministic, chancy process. We should reject this assumption. We see why if we consider what a free action would be. A free action of a man, or any person with a body, involves a physical causal process. The intended event is the result of a causal process in the brain, nerves and muscles. We can call this the *action process*. If the action process goes

back for ever, then the action is not free because it is not under the control of the agent and the agent is forced to do it (regardless of whether he feels forced or free). If the action process is at some stage indeterministic, that does not make the action free.

So the action process must have a beginning, the 'initial event'. A part of the initial event may be the result of a causal process, but a part must be not the result of a causal process, neither a deterministic nor a chancy one. We can call this event the 'initiating event'. How did the initiating event occur? Some philosophers hold that it must be the result of a process which is indeterministic at some stage. Clarke (2000, 21) argues that it has to be caused indeterministically: 'When a decision is freely made [...] there remained until the making of that decision a genuine chance that the agent would not make that decision.' Others hold that in a free action the decision is caused deterministically but the process of deliberation leading to the decision is indeterministic. (Dennett 1978; Fischer and Ravizza 1992; Mele 1995.) It is true that if an action process were indeterministic, then it would be in some sense true, before the action occurred, that it was possible that another action would occur instead of the one that did occur. But this is not what we are getting at when we say that a free agent 'could have done otherwise'. The trouble is that if it is a matter of indeterminacy which action occurs then it is not up to the agent what he does. An action that occurs by chance is not a free action because the agent lacks control over which action occurs. If an action is the result of an indeterministic process, then the agent has as little control over it as an agent has over an action that occurs as the result of a deterministic process.

Also defenders of 'agent causation', like Roderick Chisholm and Richard Swinburne, do not offer us a solution. They say that an action is free if it has 'no sufficient causal condition' (Chisholm 1976, 201) or if it is not 'causally necessitated' (Swinburne 1997, 231) or 'fully caused by earlier events' (Swinburne 1994, 25). That leaves open that it is a chance event, over which the agent would have no control. We can dismiss all approaches which try to account for freedom by introducing chance.

So how does the initiating event have to occur? If the action is free, then it is neither the result of a deterministic process, nor the result of an indeterministic process. Is there another way how an event can come about? Why not? The agent brought about the event directly. That means that it had no preceding cause but that its occurrence was due to the agent. The agent made it pop up. We can say that it was the agent's decision or choice. It would be misleading to say that it was caused by the agent's decision or choice, because that sounds as if the decision was a preceding event which

caused it. We can call an event which has no preceding cause but is due to an agent a *choice event*.¹

It does not matter whether you call the agent the 'cause' of the choice event. With a narrow concept of a cause, including just event causation, the agent is not to be called a cause and a choice event has no cause at all. With a wider concept of a cause, the agent is to be called the cause of a choice event. What matters only is that a choice event has no preceding cause, no event cause, and that its occurrence is due to the agent, it is his choice.

Human actions involve mental events that are suitably called 'willings', 'tryings', or 'undertakings'. If I try to raise my arm but the arm does not move because it is paralyzed, then there is still the trying, which is a mental event of a certain type. If I try to raise my arm successfully, then there is an event of the same type. It initiates the causal process leading to the rising of the arm. In human actions the choice events seem to be always undertakings.

Choice events will seem mysterious to many philosophers, because it has become such an unquestioned dogma that there is only one way how an event can come about, namely by being caused through a preceding event. But there is nothing incoherent or mysterious about choice events. The question is just whether there are choice events, but it is not our task here to examine the evidence for this. Choice events are only mysterious from the point of view that every event occurs through being caused by preceding events. In itself they are no more mysterious than events that are caused by preceding events.

3. God does not need undertakings

Imagine someone locked into a room with a switchboard. Pressing buttons on the switchboard makes some machines, which the person can observe through a window, behave in certain ways. All which the person can do outside his room, he can do by pressing certain buttons on the switchboard, and he can do it only in this way. Pressing buttons starts certain causal processes which lead to certain behaviour of the machines. He does not know what these processes are, but he knows which buttons he has to press in order to achieve which results.

¹ One can call the agent the cause of the choice event, but note that this account is very different from what Roderick Chisholm calls 'agent causation'. See (Wachter 2003, 187-189).

Similarly, we can act only in certain ways. When you try to raise your arm, then a certain action process is started automatically. We can change the material world only through our body, and we can move our body only through these mental events which we can call tryings or undertakings. The trying, which an identity theory would take to be identical with a brain event, causes certain events in your nerves and muscles. There is no way you can cut short this process, e.g. by directly making your muscles contract, without there occurring the brain events which usually make your muscles contract when you raise your arm. We may have several possibilities for moving a certain stone, e.g. by pushing it with our hand or by using a stick, but we (or most of us) cannot, for example, just focus on it and move it in the immediate way in which we can move our arms.

God, being allmighty and having no body, is not constrained like this. There is no thing which he always has to use in order to bring something about. He does not have to use anything in order to bring about a certain event. He can bring about every event which he can bring about *directly*. God can move a stone by moving another stone which pushes it. But He can also move the stone without using another material object. The movement of the stone then has no preceding physical cause. In the latter case he brings about the intended event more *directly* than in the former.

The divine willing view assumes that the most direct way in which God can bring about an event in the universe, like the beginning of the universe or a miracle, is through an undertaking. But why should God, in order to create a universe, first bring about an event in His mind, an undertaking, which then causes the universe? For us men, all choice events are undertakings, which, if the action succeeds, initiate a causal process leading to the intended event. But that is a limitation of power. God can bring about the universe straight away, without delay, as a choice event. God can bring about any event as a choice event. That is what his omnipotence consists in. William Alston is pointing towards this when he writes: 'If *I* am to knock over a vase or make a soufflé or communicate with someone, I must do so by moving my hands, legs, vocal organs, or whatever. But that is only because of my limitations. We can conceive of agents, corporeal or otherwise, such that things other than their bodies (if any) are under their direct voluntary control.' (Alston 1981, 61)² To have a body – more precisely, to be able to act only through a body – is a limitation of one's power. We can make a difference to the world around us only through the chunk of matter which is our body, and we can direct our body only through tryings. But God has unlimited power and thus no body; he can make a difference to

² Alston means only that God can do anything as a 'basic' action, i.e. by doing it not by doing something else. That is not exactly the same as my claim that he can bring about any event (except the usual problem cases like John' raising his arm freely) so that it has no preceding cause, because it could be that you bring about event X in a basic action but nevertheless X has a preceding cause.

the world other than through certain events in his mind and a particular chunk of matter. Whatever God chooses to happen happens without having a preceding cause.

The divine willing view rests on the thought: 'An action is initiated by an undertaking (or "willing"), an undertaking is a mental event, therefore God's actions in the world are initiated by undertakings, which are events in God's mind.' Of course, also if God acts, in some sense he 'undertakes' the action. In a sense, every event brought about by God directly is an undertaking or a willing. But only if 'undertaking' is taken to mean choice event, and not if 'undertaking' is taken to mean, as I have defined it in accordance with what the defenders of the divine willing view mean, a mental event of the kind which occurs in human actions. A free action is initiated by a choice event, and that choice event may, but need not be, an undertaking in the mind of the agent. Therefore the divine willing view is false.

If God brought about the Big Bang, then the Big Bang might not have had a preceding cause. Why should it? God brought bring it about directly.

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