



Preemption and a counterfactual analysis of divine causation

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Abstract

This paper aims to outline a counterfactual theory of divine atemporal causation that avoids problems of preemption. As a result, the presentation of the analysis is structured such that my counterfactual analysis directly addresses preemption issues. If these problems can be avoided, the theist is well on her way to proposing a usable metaphysical concept of atemporal divine causation. In the first section, I outline Lewis' original counterfactual analysis as well as how these cases of preemption cause problems for his analysis. In particular, two cases of preemption have proven problematic for counterfactual analyses: late preemption and trumping preemption. In the second section, I propose a counterfactual analysis of divine causation that is not subject to these problems of preemption. I present a counterfactual analysis of timeless divine causation, supplemented by a definition of what it means for God to allow an event to happen. In the third section, I argue this analysis is not prey to problems of preemption.

Keywords Counterfactuals · Causation · God · Time · Preemption · Atemporal causation

Introduction

Some concepts of divine atemporal causation have been proposed, but not thoroughly investigated. For instance, Brian Leftow (1991, 294) tentatively proposes a counterfactual analysis of atemporal divine sustaining. More recently, Paul Helm (2010, 241) suggested a counterfactual analysis of atemporal divine causation, albeit he does explore pitfalls of Lewis' original counterfactual analysis of causation. Without a demonstration as to why a counterfactual analysis of divine causation does not succumb to issues surrounding Lewis' original analysis, any such proposal would be quite difficult to defend. It is not my aim to defend these theories

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or determine whether or not they can handle standard objections to Lewis' original analysis. The main goal, instead, is to outline a counterfactual theory of divine atemporal causation that definitively avoids problems of preemption. As a result, the paper is structured such that my counterfactual analysis directly addresses preemption issues. If these problems can be avoided, the theist is well on her way to proposing a usable metaphysical concept of atemporal divine causation.¹

In the first section, I outline Lewis' original counterfactual analysis as well as how these cases of preemption cause problems for his analysis. In particular, two cases of preemption have proven problematic for counterfactual analyses: late preemption and trumping preemption. Late preemption occurs when some effect would have occurred, had the cause in the actual world not occurred, via some preempted backup cause, thereby breaking counterfactual dependence on the actual cause and its effect. Trumping preemption occurs when one cause overpowers another in such a way that only one is deemed causally efficacious; yet, had the cause in the actual world not occurred, the preempted cause would have brought about the same effect. As a result, the trumped backup cause breaks counterfactual dependence between the actual cause and the effect.

In the second section, I propose a counterfactual analysis of divine causation that is not subject to these problems of preemption. I present a counterfactual analysis of timeless divine causation, supplemented by a definition of what it means for God to allow an event to happen.

In the third section, I argue this analysis is not prey to problems of preemption. The problems of preemption come in when there is a backup that could have brought about the same event had the actual cause not been present. I argue that, with reference to God's divine act and preempted causes, there are two possible situations that might obtain. First, there might be no backup cause present, in which case the counterfactual dependence between God's act and the event is not broken. Second, there might be a backup cause, but, I argue, the event brought about by the backup cause would only occur if God allows it to occur. If the effect would have still come about—the same effect counterfactually dependent on God's act in the actual world—then that effect is counterfactually dependent on God's allowing it to occur. The relevant counterfactual dependence in the second scenario, then, exhibits a different sort of counterfactual dependence: the dependence of the event on God standing in an allows relation to that event. Therefore, in order for the preemption to be relevant to the second scenario, there must be a preempted backup "allower"—i.e. something else that could have allowed an event were God not to allow it—to God's allowing an effect. However, were God not to allow the effect to occur, nothing else could have allowed it to occur. Thus, there is no example of preemption in either scenario and, I conclude, no cases of late or trumping preemption that affect the counterfactual analysis proposed herein.

¹ This proposal may be a good place to start in rebutting Davis' (2012, 68) argument that causal relations are necessarily temporal and Swinburne's (1994, 81) argument (at least, Helm's (2010, 240) interpretation of Swinburne) that "temporal notions are parasitic upon causal notions."

Section I: counterfactuals and preemption

Lewis' well-known counterfactual analysis of causation runs thus:

c causes e =df. (i) c and e both occur, (ii) c and e are distinct, and (iii) there is some causal chain such that, had c not initiated this causal chain—where an intermediate event directly preceding e , d_n , is counterfactually dependent on some other intermediate event, d_{n-1} , d_{n-1} is counterfactually dependent on d_{n-2} , and so on until c and e are linked by this chain— e would not have occurred.

However, many cases of preemptive causation have caused problems for this analysis in various ways. One of the first examples of preemption found in the literature is that of late preemption.

The problem of late preemption can be summarized as follows: had one event, c , failed to bring about an event, e , a second event, c_1 , would have caused e . The idea here is that there is a “backup” to the cause, which means that some event e is not counterfactually dependent on c . Under the counterfactual analysis, since e is not counterfactually dependent on c , c cannot be considered a cause of its effect, e . Yet, this seems absurd. Imagine a scenario in which two archers, Suzy and Joe, fire arrows at a glass bottle. Joe's shot, c_1 , is slightly slower than Suzy's, c , and would have broken the bottle had Suzy not fired her arrow. The counterfactual analysis leads one to believe that the breaking of the bottle would not have occurred had Suzy not fired her arrow. Since her shot is clearly the cause of the bottle breaking, the breaking should depend counterfactually on her firing the arrow; i.e. had c , Suzy's firing, not occurred, e , the breaking, would not have occurred. However, the breaking would have occurred. Joe's arrow would have shattered the bottle had Suzy's arrow failed to. Thus, even had c not occurred, e would have occurred. The counterfactual analysis, then, wrongly leads one to believe that Suzy's firing is not the cause of the bottle breaking because the bottle breaking is not counterfactually dependent on her firing.² The counterfactual analysis yields incorrect results.

A second example of preemptive causation is given by Jonathan Schaffer (2000), which is known as trumping preemption. Schaffer (2000, 165) asks his audience to imagine a world in which magic exists and in which the first spell cast on any given day is the only causally efficacious spell. In this world, it is a law of magic that the first spell cast on any given day, and no others, exercise causal influence. Merlin, a wizard in this world, casts a spell to turn the prince into a frog at midnight, and his is the first spell that day. Later that same day, Morgana casts the same exact spell to turn the prince into a frog—the only other spell cast that day. In such a world, it seems intuitively clear that Merlin's spell is the cause of the frog turning into a prince at midnight.

² Lewis (1986) attempts to deal with late preemption in his “Postscripts to ‘Causation,’” with an appeal to the notion of quasi-dependence. A definition of quasi-dependence runs as follows: “Let c and e be distinct events that both occur. e quasi-dependes upon c iff e causally depends upon c in most intrinsic duplicates of the c - e process” (Hitchcock 2015, 301). For reasons why quasi-dependence might not solve all problems of late preemption, see (Paul 1998).

However, the counterfactual analysis does not consider Merlin's spell the cause, since the prince turning into a frog at midnight is not counterfactually dependent on him casting the spell. The counterfactual analysis runs as follows: if c , Merlin's spell, had not occurred, then e , the prince turning into a frog, would not have occurred. Yet, there is no counterfactual dependence between Merlin's spell and the prince becoming a frog in this example, for, if c had not occurred, e still would have occurred on account of Morgana's spell which, in the absence of Merlin's spell, would have been the first spell cast that day. As a result, since there is no counterfactual dependence of the prince's turning into a frog on Merlin's spell, Merlin's spell cannot be considered the cause of the prince turning into a frog. This conclusion is contrary to what seemed to be the prior and obvious conclusion that Merlin's spell is the cause of the prince turning into the frog; the analysis again leads to unsatisfactory results.

Section II: counterfactuals and divine causation

In this section I will mirror aspects of Lewis' counterfactual analysis, but argue that the analysis that follows is not subject to cases of late or trumping preemption. Since the goal, ultimately, is to provide an account of divine timeless causation, the following account is a causal analysis restricted to a timeless God who is causally efficacious in the spacetime universe. I propose that timeless causation by a divine being be characterized as a binary relation between cause and effect:

CAUSE (c , e): c timelessly causes a temporal effect $e = \text{df.}$ (i) c occurs timelessly and e occurs in some temporal series, (ii) if c were not to occur, e would not occur or (iii) if c were not to occur but e still occurs, God would allow e to occur.

In CAUSE, c is to be understood as God's timeless act. (i) makes clear that the cause must occur timelessly and the effect is not timeless, thereby ruling out cases of reverse dependence: a temporal event cannot cause a timeless event.³ (ii) is the counterfactual dependence integral to any counterfactual analysis of causation. (iii) is what must occur if the counterfactual dependence described in (ii) does not hold between God's timeless act and a temporal event, yet that event still occurs; the importance of (iii) will be become apparent later when I address late preemption. To put the definition a different way, God timelessly causes some temporal event iff that event's occurrence is either counterfactually dependent on God's act or that event, in the closest possible world to the actual where a preempted cause brings about the event, is counterfactually dependent on God's allowing it to occur.

³ Leftow (1991, 294) introduces clauses similar to (i) to his analysis of divine sustaining that also rule out cases of reverse dependence. Evan Fales (1997, 181–183) and Quinten Smith (1996, 174) argue that a counterfactual analysis of divine causation is impossible due to reverse dependence. I set aside their objections for now since it is not within the scope of the present thesis.

Before demonstrating how this definition of timeless causation avoids problems of preemption, some other machinery must be introduced, beginning with the allow relation found in CAUSES (iii). Many theists do not want to say that God is a direct cause of every event—he may, for instance, allow secondary causes to directly bring about events; rather, he directly causes some things to occur while others he allows to happen. For instance, many theists affirm the idea that God does not cause people to sin or does not cause physical pain, but, instead, allows these events to occur. I will define this relation between God and events as follows:

ALLOW (non- c , e): the non-occurrence of c timelessly allows a temporal effect e =df. (i) the non-occurrence of c belongs to a timeless domain and e occurs in some temporal series, (ii) CAUSE-(ii) does not hold between c and e , and (iii) if c occurs, then e would not occur.

(ii) entails that CAUSE (ii) and ALLOW do not hold between God and some effect simultaneously at the time of that effect's genesis. (iii) is a different kind of counterfactual dependence than that in CAUSE (ii). The basic idea behind ALLOW (iii) is simple: in the actual world, where ALLOW holds between God and some effect, God is not acting to prevent that effect. What is meant by this is that, were God to act, the effect would not occur. Moreover, if God is defined as an omnipotent being, ALLOW (iii) holds no matter what situation were to occur, had God so acted to prevent an event.⁴ In other words, the acting of an omnipotent being is necessarily efficacious since, by definition, God can do all things logically possible.

Finally, one can understand the sovereignty of God according to these two definitions. Enns (2014, 760) defines God's sovereignty as follows: that "God is the supreme ruler and authority, that he ordains whatever comes to pass, and that his divine purpose is always accomplished." In a similar way, Grudem (1994, 217) defines sovereignty as "[God's] exercise of rule over his creation." Using CAUSE and ALLOW, I propose the theist has a more precise definition of 'sovereignty.' The following definition of God's sovereignty as a relation between God and events captures well the idea that God has control, cannot be thwarted, exercises rule, etc.:

God is sovereign=df. Necessarily, God stands in the CAUSE relation to all e 's.

In other words, God is sovereign iff, for all e s, God's timeless act stands in one of the two counterfactual dependence relations found in CAUSE. Working with the assumption that God is sovereign, any event that happens is either counterfactually dependent on some timeless divine act or allowed by God.

⁴ All that is required for (iii) is that God is omnipotent in the sense that God can do all things logically possible. For some definitions of God's omnipotence that work well with the ideas here, see Wierenga (1983) and Leftow (2011, 190–191).

Section III: divine causation and preemption

This machinery allows the counterfactual analysis of divine causation to avoid the problems posed by late and trumping preemption. Take the idea of late preemption, that some backup is present to sufficiently bring about the effect even in the absence of *c*. Imagine some ordinary event, say the knocking over of a glass. Under the counterfactual analysis, God timelessly causes the glass to be knocked over if, had God's divine act not occurred, the glass would not have been knocked over. The question then becomes whether or not there can be a backup sufficient to bring about the effect had God not acted on the glass. The answer seems obvious enough: of course there is. I can knock the glass over myself. The late preemption concern rears its head. If God does not knock over the glass, I would have knocked over the glass, so *e* would have occurred even though God's timeless act does not. It seems the glass being knocked over is not counterfactually dependent on God's act, so God did not cause it to be knocked over in the actual world. This conclusion is absurd.

Yet, the prior example excludes CAUSES (iii). The counterfactual in CAUSES (iii) is what must have occurred had God not acted and *e* still have occurred. In light of CAUSES (iii), the preempting scenario must be reexamined. Take, again, the glass example. God is considered a cause if there is a counterfactual dependence between *c*, God's timeless act, and *e* or between *e* and God's allowing *e*. If there is no backup cause, CAUSE (ii) describes the world closest to the actual, i.e. the world in which God causes the knocking down of the glass. Had God not acted, then the glass would not have been knocked over in the closest world to the actual. Therefore, God is considered the cause of the knocking over in the actual world.

The problem of late preemption comes in when some other event could have caused the knocking over of the glass. According to CAUSES (iii), if God does not act and the glass is still knocked over, it is only because God allows it to occur. Suppose I go to knock over the glass one second after the temporal effect that would have been brought about by God's timeless act. In this case, the closest world to the actual is described by (iii): God allows me to knock over the glass in the closest possible world to the actual. If there is a backup cause that would have brought about the same effect in the closest world to the actual, and God does not knock over the glass, CAUSES (iii) states that the only way I knock over the glass is by God allowing the glass to be knocked over. This must be the case for *any* would-be backup bringing about the same effect since, assuming God is sovereign, God stands in one of the two counterfactual dependence relations of CAUSE to all temporal events. Since the event is not counterfactually dependent on God's timeless act, the event must be counterfactually dependent on God's allowing it to occur via backup causes. As a result, *all* effects caused by would-be backup causes are counterfactually dependent on God allowing them to occur. Therefore, the effect is counterfactually dependent on standing in the ALLOW relation to God. There are then two possible worlds in which God does not perform the timeless act *c* that might be closest to the actual, one without a backup cause and one with, in which either CAUSE (ii) or (iii) holds:

If c does not occur then either:

1. There is no backup cause and e would not have occurred; thus, e is counterfactually dependent on God's timeless act or
2. There is a backup cause and e would still have occurred; thus, e is counterfactually dependent on God instantiating the ALLOW relation to e .

Moreover, since (1) describes the closest world to the actual in which no backup cause is present, the possibility of a backup cause for (2)'s counterfactual must be present in order for late preemption to occur. Yet, the counterfactual dependence in (2) is no longer dependence between relata of CAUSE (ii), but is instead between relata of the CAUSE (iii) which utilizes the ALLOW relation. This shifts the burden. In order to provide an example of late preemption in (2), the consequent of the counterfactual must hold had not the antecedent occurred. What is the relevant counterfactual in (2)? The counterfactual dependence described in (2) is as follows: had God not allowed some event to occur, the event would not have occurred. In order, then, for there to be a case of preemption, something else must have allowed that same event to have occurred such that the antecedent of the counterfactual be false while the consequent remain true. Yet, this is plainly impossible. Had God not allowed some event to occur, *nothing else could have allowed that same event to occur*. This follows from God's omnipotence, as noted earlier; had he acted and some event not occurred as a result, there could be nothing else that could bring about that same event since an omnipotent being's acting to prevent an effect is necessarily efficacious. Therefore, since (1) is not subject to backup causes and it is impossible for any backup causes to occur for the counterfactual dependence between ALLOW and some event in (2), there can be no cases of late preemption for the present counterfactual analysis of divine causation.

A similar argument can now be given for cases of trumping preemption. Suppose that, in some possible world, it is a law of nature that the Red Sea splits at noon. This world follows the biblical timeline at least up to the point of the famed exodus story. The enslaved Hebrew people approach the Red Sea and, behold, the sea splits at noon so that the people can cross. This time, however, it is a timeless divine act that causes the sea to split; God's act trumps the laws of nature in that world. It seems that, had God not acted, the counterfactual analysis renders the conclusion that the sea would not have split. However, the sea would have split due to the laws of nature in that world which were trumped by God's divine act. Since counterfactual dependence between God's act and the sea splitting is broken, God cannot be said to be the cause of the sea splitting. Lewis' original counterfactual analysis yields undesired results.

In response, given the definitions provided earlier, one can run the same argument as was given against cases of late preemption. By the definition of CAUSE, had God not acted, he would still be the cause in the actual world had one of two things occurred in the nearest possible world: there be no backup cause, (1), or God allows the effect, (2). In the imagined world where the sea splits every day

at noon, there would always be a backup cause, so (1) is not the description of the closest possible world to the actual for this scenario. Therefore, God would have allowed the laws of nature to act as a trumped backup cause. Since ALLOW holds between God and the sea splitting in the closest world to the actual, the relevant counterfactual dependence pertains to the counterfactual found in (2). Further, in order to create a trumping problem for the counterfactual dependence between God allowing an effect and the actual occurrence of said effect, it must be the case that God's allowing some effect to occur is trumping something else that might have allowed the sea to split. Yet, as was the case with the argument against late preemption, had God not allowed some effect to occur nothing else could have allowed it to occur. Nothing could have allowed the sea to split had God not allowed the sea to split. Due to God's omnipotence, this argument will work no matter what sort of trumped thing might be imaged to break counterfactual dependence between God instantiating the ALLOW relation to some event and that event occurring. As a result, there can be no cases of either late or trumping preemption for the present analysis of timeless divine causation.

Section IV: an objection

If God stands in the CAUSE relation to all *e*'s, then God is the cause of everything, including human choices. This view of causation presented here commits the theist to divine determinism, which means no human actions can be free. As a result, no incompatibilist can accept this account of divine causation.

My response: God is the cause of free choice in that he gives humans the ability to choose. In other words, without God's creating free wills, no free choices could have ever been made. In this sense one can count God a cause of a free being's choices since, had he not given humans the requisite powers to choose, there would be no free choice.

This response may be spelled out more specifically in various ways, one of which might be to define the non-occurrence of God's divine act as a cause by omission.⁵ This seems to follow naturally from ALLOW, where the non-occurrence of a divine act is the cause of an effect. Notice here that God is considered a cause by *not acting*. If a choice of a free being were to bring about an effect, and there is an absence of a divine act, it must be that some other power is directly bringing about the effect. For the purposes here, this other power would be the free will which God had already created within that being. Thus, one might say that God is the cause of a human having free will in the sense of CAUSE (ii); if some divine act, *c*, does not occur, some temporal effect, the gaining of powers of free will, would not have occurred. Further, one might then claim that God is the cause of a certain free action in that he allowed the powers of a free being to be exercised. He is a cause in the sense that ALLOW obtains between the non-occurrence of some divine act and some temporal

⁵ There is precedence for cause by omission in the philosophy of science—see Schaffer (2004)—and in the free will literature—see Sartorio (2016).

effect. Thus, God is a cause of a free choice in terms of the counterfactual dependence found in CAUSE (iii). Yet, this counterfactual dependence does not necessarily demonstrate that God *determines* free actions, only that he causes them in the sense that a divine act does not result in the non-occurrence of a freely chosen action. Since it may ultimately be the powers of the human will that are another cause of free human choice, my account does not commit the theist to divine determinism.

One might also understand this proposal as following Lewis' distinction between *a* cause and *the* cause (1973, 558–559); I propose God is *a* cause of a human's free actions, not *the* cause. The other cause of human free choice is, presumably, the power of free choice God gifted to free beings. As a result, the present account remains neutral on issues free will, so the incombabilist need not reject it out of fear of divine determinism.

Conclusion

In order for this account of divine causation to move past objections to counterfactual analyses of causation in general, I have presented the account in such a way that avoids the well-known problems of late and trumping preemption. While other conditions may be added to CAUSE and ALLOW in the future to satisfy more specific theological leanings and their commitments to God as a cause, they have been presented as definitions intending to be neutral in regards to certain theological debates, i.g. the free will debate between Armenian and Calvinist theologies. Nonetheless, the present account arms the theist with a coherent account of atemporal divine causation.⁶

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