

Does God have the moral standing to blame?

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Abstract

In this paper, I introduce a problem to the philosophy of religion – the problem of divine moral standing – and explain how this problem is distinct from (albeit related to) the more familiar problem of evil (with which it is often conflated). In short, the problem is this: in virtue of how God would be (or, on some given conception, is) “involved in” our actions, how is it that God has the moral standing to blame us for performing those very actions? In light of the recent literature on “moral standing”, I consider God’s moral standing to blame on two models of “divine providence”: open theism, and theological determinism. I contend that God may have standing on open theism, and – perhaps surprisingly – may also have standing, even on theological determinism, given the truth of compatibilism. The topic of this paper thus sheds considerable light on the traditional philosophical debate about the conditions of moral responsibility.

The history of the relationship between theistic belief and moral responsibility is both long and complex. In the theistic context, perhaps the central problem regarding human moral responsibility has been this: how does *God’s* control over what happens leave room for the sort of *creaturely* control necessary for moral responsibility? A central challenge for traditional theists has thus always been to articulate and defend an account of God’s causal control over the world that respects and preserves human responsibility. Such theories divide according to familiar lines; broadly speaking, incompatibilists about responsibility and determinism have endorsed “open theism” or “Molinism”, whereas compatibilists have endorsed what might be called “theological determinism”. And, broadly speaking, the former accuse the latter of eliminating creaturely responsibility; the latter accuse the former of eliminating divine sovereignty. Such is the familiar dialectic.

According to the major theistic religions, however, God does not simply *make* us responsible; God furthermore *holds* us responsible. But the claim that God *holds* us responsible raises substantial new difficulties beyond those entailed by the claim that God

makes us responsible. In particular, from the mere fact that a given agent is blameworthy, it does not follow that just *any* further agent is well-positioned morally to blame her. Accordingly, from the mere fact that God has made us responsible, it does not follow that *God* is well-positioned morally to hold us responsible. In the terminology employed in a recent (and growing) literature, even if we are blameworthy, it doesn't follow that God has the *moral standing* to blame. After all, God would seem to be intimately *involved* in our wrongdoing. And even if God's involvement in our wrongdoing indeed leaves us responsible, it may nevertheless imply that God lacks the moral standing to criticize that very wrongdoing. In sum: even if we are blameworthy, we may nevertheless be able appropriately to say to God, "Who are *you* to blame me?"

The first goal of this paper is therefore to motivate a new problem within the philosophy of religion: the problem of divine moral standing. I say that this is a "new" problem, not because no philosophers or theologians have previously addressed the problem at issue; as we'll see shortly, many have, at least indirectly.¹ I say that the problem is "new" because, as I also hope to show, the problem has not received the detailed and careful articulation it would seem to deserve. In particular, the problem of God's *standing* is often conflated with a related problem with which it is nevertheless importantly distinct: the problem of evil. As I aim to bring out, however, it is conceptually possible that whereas God is morally perfect (and so the problem of evil is solved), nevertheless God lacks standing; and it is furthermore conceptually possible that whereas the person at issue is not morally perfect (and so is not "God"), this person nevertheless has standing. Given these distinctions, we must be clear: are we challenging (or defending) God's *perfection* – or instead God's *standing*?

The second goal of this paper is to address the question it means to raise: does God have the moral standing to blame? My answer is as follows: So long as God gives us free will, then God will have the standing to blame. (Whether, given certain other salient facts,

¹ After this paper was accepted, however, I learned of Churchill's paper, "Determinism and Divine Blame," which is (as of my current writing) forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*. Churchill's paper – which I hope to interact with in future work – also takes up the question of the divine moral standing to blame.

God could be *perfect* is, however, another matter – and one I won’t address.) In particular, I consider two “models of providence” at opposite ends of the theological spectrum – open theism, and theological determinism – and assess whether, on those models, God has the standing to blame God’s creatures when those creatures do wrong. (I will assume that, if God has standing even on theological determinism, God will also have standing on [the intermediate position] Molinism.²) Perhaps surprisingly, I contend that, in both cases, the answer is Yes. On open theist assumptions, I shall argue, and as I suspect many will grant, there is no clear reason why God should lack the standing to blame. The case of theological determinism, however, is substantially more difficult. In the bulk of the paper, then, I argue that, *given compatibilism*, the God of theological determinism indeed will have the standing to blame. Accordingly, if you want to maintain that God could not possibly appropriately blame those God determines, then you will have to abandon compatibilism. The project of this paper, as I hope will become clear, thus has substantial implications for the traditional debate about the conditions of moral responsibility.

The plan of the paper is as follows. First, I take up the question: what are the conditions on having the “standing to blame”? The contemporary discussion of “moral standing” was arguably inaugurated by G.A. Cohen’s important paper, “Casting the First Stone: who can, and who can’t, condemn the terrorists?”, and this is where I begin my discussion. Cohen proposes two conditions on having “moral standing”: a non-hypocrisy condition, and – more importantly, for our purposes – a non-involvement condition. With these conditions on the table, we will then be in position to ask how they apply (or fail to

² And any yet further intermediary positions besides, e.g. what Kvanvig (*Destiny and Deliberation*, xiii) calls the “Arminianism” developed in his *Destiny and Deliberation* (Chapters 4 - 8).

apply) to God.³ We will also be in position to make a sharp distinction between the question of God's *standing* and the question of God's *perfection* (and some related questions besides). I go on to contend that, on reflection, Cohen's two conditions in fact reduce to a single condition of *moral commitment*. The question whether God has standing, then, becomes the question whether, despite God's providential activities, God can plausibly still be morally committed to the values that would condemn what we do. I then turn to assess the pictures of God associated with open theism and theological determinism, and consider whether God has the moral standing to blame, so construed, on those pictures.

Cohen on Hypocrisy and Involvement

Cohen's paper is one of the first to explicitly focus on the issues here at stake, and is worth quoting at length. He introduces the relevant topic as follows:

We can distinguish three ways in which a person may seek to silence, or to blunt the edge of, a critic's condemnation. First, she may seek to show that she did not, in fact, perform the action under criticism. Second, and without denying that she performed that action, she may claim that the action does not warrant moral condemnation, because there was an adequate justification for it, or at least a legitimate excuse for performing it. Third, while not denying that the action was performed, and that it is to be condemned (which is not to say: while *agreeing* that it is to be condemned), she can seek to discredit her critic's assertion of her standing as a good faith condemner of the relevant action.⁴

³ I first discussed Cohen's account of moral standing in my "Manipulation and Moral Standing," and have further discussed it in my "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame." Some of the material in the next two sections is borrowed from these two papers. In effect, in the next two sections, I quickly explain one of the main results defended in "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame". The overarching point of this paper is to apply this result to the case of God. However, in order to apply this result, I first must repeat some aspects of it here.

⁴ Cohen, "Casting the First Stone," 119.

It is this third way of responding to a critic's blame that Cohen is interested in, and here he identifies two different versions of such a response:

The first of these techniques for compromising a critic's voice was signalled in my childhood by the retort 'Look who's talking!' Shapiro might say, 'Hey, Goldstein, how come you didn't come to the club last night? All the guys were expecting you.' And Goldstein might reply: 'Look who's talking. *Twice* last week, *you* didn't show up.' Unless Shapiro could now point to some relevant difference, his power to condemn was compromised, whether or not the criticism he originally made of Goldstein was sound.⁵

For that first type of would-be discrediting response I have three good labels: 'look who's talking', 'pot calling the kettle black', and '*tu quoque*'. For my contrasting second type I have no good vernacular or Latin tag. But I will point you in the right direction by reminding you of retorts to criticism like 'you made me do it', and 'you started it', even though those phrases don't cover all the variants of the second type. I shall name the second type 'You're involved in it yourself', but if anybody can think of a better name, then suggestions are welcome.⁶

Cohen, then, explicitly contrasts the "non-involvement" condition with the "non-hypocrisy"

⁵ Cohen, "Casting the First Stone," 121-122.

⁶ Cohen, "Casting the First Stone," 123.

condition.⁷ He goes on:

In this second type of silencing response you are disabled from condemning me not because you are responsible for something *similar* or worse yourself but because you bear at least some responsibility for the *very thing* that you seek to criticize. My Nazi superior cannot condemn me for doing what he orders me on pain of death to do, even if I *should* disobey, and accept death.⁸

Note: Cohen here puts his point in terms of *responsibility*. The idea seems to be that if you are *responsible* for someone's wrongdoing, you cannot *criticize* that wrongdoing. He elaborates as follows:

I said earlier that among the variants of this second way of deflecting criticism ... are 'You started it' and 'You made me do it': the reply has many variants, with 'It's your fault that I did it' at one kind of extreme and 'You helped me to do it' at another. And note that if it's your fault, in whole or in part, that I did it, then it can be your fault for structurally different reasons. Here's part of the relevant wide array: you ordered me to do it, you asked me to do it, you forced me to do it, you left me with no reasonable alternative, you gave me the means to do it (perhaps by selling me the arms that I needed). When such responses from a criticized agent are in place, they

⁷ This contrast also appears in a series of recent papers (Tadros, "Poverty and Criminal Responsibility," Duff, "Blame, Moral Standing and the Legitimacy of the Criminal Trial," and Watson, "A Moral Predicament in the Criminal Law") regarding a "moral predicament in the criminal law" (to use the title of Watson's paper). The topic of these papers is importantly parallel to the issues I consider here. For these authors, the question is whether the *state* is morally permitted to hold certain wrongdoers criminally responsible for their crimes, when the state is (arguably) complicit in (or otherwise partially responsible for) those very crimes. Precisely how tight the analogy is to *God's* holding us responsible (given a certain model of providence) is a question I will not pursue.

⁸ Cohen, "Casting the First Stone," 124.

compromise criticism that comes from the now impugned critic, while leaving third parties entirely free to criticize that agent.⁹

Finally, Cohen writes:

The general form of ‘You’re involved in it yourself’ is this: you are implicated in the commission of *this* very act, as its co-responsible stimulus, commander, coercer, guard, assistant, or whatever (whether or not what you did was wrong, or similar to what I did, or worse than what I did).¹⁰

So much for Cohen’s two conditions. Now we can begin to ask: how might these conditions apply to God? As a first approximation: the charge of involvement certainly seems more promising – and more relevant – than the charge of hypocrisy. If God blames me for stealing a bicycle, it seems doubtful that I could reply that God *himself* has stolen bicycles, so had better keep quiet. The charge of involvement, however, seems more pressing. For on *any* conception of God, there will be a sense in which God gave me the “means” to steal the bicycle, and on any conception of God, God was in position to *prevent* my stealing the bicycle, and yet did not – and so is, to that extent, responsible for the fact that I did end up stealing it. And on *some* conceptions of God (to be discussed shortly), God is himself responsible for my stealing the bicycle, precisely on grounds that – in some sense – God himself caused me to do so (along with everything else). And so whereas it is doubtful that I could object to God’s blame on grounds that God has done something similar himself, it does seem that I may be able to object on grounds that God is himself responsible for the very thing he is condemning. This is the problem of the divine moral standing to blame.

I will return to the conditions on “moral standing” as proposed by Cohen shortly. At this stage, however, it is crucial to see how the problem of divine standing is distinct from – albeit related to – the more familiar problem of evil. We can bring out the distinction as follows. Suppose that there is, in fact, an omnipotent, omniscient creator of the universe.

⁹ Cohen, “Casting the First Stone,” 126.

¹⁰ Cohen, “Casting the First Stone,” 127.

The problem of evil, in short, is this: in view of the facts of evil, how could any such creator nevertheless be morally perfect? If we hold fixed omnipotence and omniscience, then we'll have to forego moral perfection. (And if it is essential to being "God" that one is morally perfect, we'll have to say that any such creator is not, in fact, God.) But the problem of divine standing is distinct from this problem. The problem of standing is this: in view of how such a creator would be (or, on some given conception, is) involved in our actions, how could that creator nevertheless have the standing to blame us? And here we must make two points. First, some will contend that *even if* the problem of evil is solved, so that the given creator is, in fact, morally perfect, nevertheless that creator could lack the standing to blame. And, second, even if such a creator has the *standing to blame*, it doesn't follow that this creator in fact must be perfect. The two problems are, in this way, distinct.

Consider the former claim first. And recall Cohen's articulation of the "general form" of the "you're involved in it yourself" response to the critic:

You are implicated in the commission of *this* very act, as its co-responsible stimulus, commander, coercer, guard, assistant, or whatever (whether or not what you did was wrong, or similar to what I did, or worse than what I did).

From this passage, it can seem that Cohen endorses the possibility of what we might call *no-fault* loss of standing. Because you are implicated in the commission of *this very act*, you can't blame me – *whether or not what you did was wrong*. For Cohen, then, it would appear that the "you're involved in it yourself" response does not turn on a claim of *wrongful* or *criticizable* involvement. One's involvement might remove one's standing to blame, even if that involvement was itself faultless or blameless. We might put the point like this. For Cohen, one's involvement in (and responsibility for) someone else's wrongdoing may be blameless – but it may nevertheless leave a sort of "moral residue", which residue implies that one is morally disabled from criticizing that wrongdoing, even if that wrongdoing objectively

deserves criticism.¹¹ But on such a conception of moral standing, it would not follow simply from God's being *perfect* that God would thereby have *standing*. God's providential activities in governing the world may be perfectly upstanding, and perfectly blameless, and yet nevertheless, in virtue of those activities, God may lack the standing to blame. Presumably, then, Cohen (and those like him) would not be content, concerning God's standing to criticize us, merely with a defense of the claim that God's involvement was blameless. That, they may say, isn't the point. Their point isn't that God did something wrong. Their point is that, whether or not God did something wrong, God is *involved*, and so God is in no position to blame.

Whether there can be "no fault" loss of standing is of central importance concerning whether God could have the standing to blame; I turn briefly to this question shortly. Consider first, however, the second point noted above – the point that the relevant creator might have *standing* even if that creator isn't *perfect*. Theists, of course, would regard it as a pyrrhic victory if they could successfully defend God's standing, but not God's perfection. At the same time, it will be an important conceptual point in what follows that the creator needn't be perfect in order to have standing to blame. (After all, none of *us* are perfect, but presumably some of us do have standing.¹²) We will consider, in turn, various challenges to God's standing, and it is crucial to see that the resources needed to defend God's standing

¹¹ Matt King, in a recent paper ("Manipulation Arguments and the Moral Standing to Blame"), explicitly defends this conception of moral standing and the "involvement" condition. Lippert-Rasmussen ("Who Can I Blame?", 299) seems open to the possibility as well. For an interesting discussion of the concept of "moral residue" (albeit in a different context than the one at issue here), see Stump, "Personal relations and moral residue."

¹² Of course, this claim might be challenged; in fact, this claim was seemingly challenged by Jesus in the famous episode of the woman caught in adultery. Here Jesus says: "He who is without sin may cast the first stone", not "He who has not committed adultery may cast the first stone." If the idea here is that only the sinless are in position to condemn, then the implication is that none of us are in position to condemn. Readers may make of this suggestion what they will.

are different from (and more minimal than) those needed to defend God's perfection. The questions are simply different questions, and the issues different issues.

Against "no fault" loss of standing – and towards a unified account

Here, I turn to the question raised above: can there be "no fault" loss of standing? I certainly cannot claim fully to resolve this question here. I contend, however, that the cases to which Cohen points do not adequately support this possibility.¹³

Recall that it is crucial to the phenomenon under consideration that it may apply, *even if* we grant that the relevant target is morally responsible. That is, what we're interested in is the conditions under which one lacks standing to blame someone who is *in fact* a morally responsible wrongdoer. However, I contend that, when we investigate Cohen's imagined "wide array" of responses more carefully, they work in either one of two ways: first, by indicating that the involvement took away (or at least diminished) the target's freedom, and therefore also his moral responsibility, or second, by indicating something about the would-be blamer's commitment to the relevant values. In neither case, however, is *mere* involvement doing the work to undermine one's standing to blame someone who is in fact morally responsible. More particularly, if one's "involvement" implies one's lack of standing, this is because, at a minimum, it implies a *fault*.

To explain. Consider, first, "You forced me to do it." It is, in a sense, easy to see how "You forced me to do it" might disable criticism: insofar as one was forced to do what one does, one isn't responsible. Similar remarks apply to "You made me do it", "You coerced me into doing it," and "You left me with no reasonable alternative." If your involvement in my coming to do something left me with no reasonable alternative to doing it, then your involvement seemingly took away my freedom with respect to doing it; instead, I was forced, and so not responsible. However, insofar as one's response to a critic serves to indicate that one is not even *responsible*, we do not here have an instance of the kind of

¹³ Again, I more fully develop these points in Todd, "A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame," and some of the material in this section is borrowed from Todd, "Manipulation and Moral Standing," and Todd, "A Unified Account".

response at issue – one that explicitly does *not* deny one’s responsibility. In short, the “reply” to God we are considering in this paper is *not* “You made me to do it, so I’m not responsible,” but instead, “Even if I’m responsible, *you* can’t blame me.”

However, if the response does not work by indicating one’s non-responsibility, I claim, then it works only by indicating something further about the blamer – beyond the blamer’s mere *responsibility* for what one does. To see this point, we must consider Cohen’s other examples:

- You helped me to do it.
- You asked me to do it.
- You gave me the means to do it.
- You commanded me to do it.

Crucially, I contend that, in all of these cases, there are ways in which one might have done the thing in question, and thereby be *responsible* (even morally responsible) for what the given person does, and yet one’s standing to blame her remains intact. Such cases all display a similar structure – a structure we can bring out by considering Cohen’s case of the Nazi commander.

Now, Cohen certainly seems right that the typical Nazi commander lacks the standing to blame his soldiers for faithfully following his orders, even if such orders should be disobeyed. Importantly, however, what accounts for this fact is not *merely* that the commander is (morally) *responsible* for what his soldiers do when following his orders. Rather, this is because, for the *typical* commander, any criticism he might direct towards his soldiers for faithfully following his commands would have to be – in a sense to be explained – “hypocritical”. Consider the case of Steffen:

Steffen is a typical Nazi commander working in a death camp. He hears rumors of an escape attempt. Thus, he orders Thomas to investigate the fence and sound the alarm, should he see any prisoners escaping. Thomas sees the prisoners, sounds the alarm, and the prisoners are caught and executed. Now, Thomas *should* have let the prisoners go; he should have had mercy and simply reported back to Steffen that there was nothing to the rumors. But he doesn’t.

In this case, of course, Steffen lacks the standing to blame Thomas for sounding the alarm. Indeed, absent further details, the case can seem unintelligible: why would Steffen – a typical Nazi commander, and someone who presumably *endorses* actions such as Thomas’ – be *blaming* Thomas for what he does?

Consider Jonas, however:

Jonas is a Nazi commander working in a death camp. However, unlike Steffen, Jonas is secretly opposed to the Nazi regime. He thus does everything within his power to save the lives of as many prisoners as possible, consistent, of course, with maintaining his position as a committed Nazi; Jonas (correctly) reasons that he can do much more good secretly sabotaging the Nazi efforts as a trusted commander than he could by open defiance. Jonas hears rumors of an escape. In order to keep appearances, he must order someone to investigate the fence. Jonas thus orders Thomas to investigate the fence and sound the alarm should he see anyone attempting escape. Jonas chose Thomas for this task because he (blamelessly, though incorrectly) thought that, of all the people he might choose, Thomas would be the most likely to have mercy and not sound the alarm should he actually find prisoners escaping, and instead report back that there was nothing to the rumors. Instead, however, Thomas discovers the escaping prisoners, sounds the alarm, and the prisoners are caught and executed.

It seems clear that, in this case, Jonas retains the standing to blame Thomas for sounding the alarm. Hearing the alarm, it seems perfectly appropriate for Jonas to inwardly condemn Thomas for not showing mercy. And later Jonas might confront Thomas about his act. Thomas might say, “But you ordered me to do it!” And Jonas might reply: “Yes, I ordered you to do it, but that gives you no excuse; you should have disobeyed my orders, even at great risk to yourself.” What, then, makes the difference (in moral standing) between Jonas and Steffen? Well, it is not that whereas Steffen is *responsible* for what Thomas did, Jonas is not. Jonas *is* responsible for what Thomas did; anyway, if Steffen is, so is Jonas. That is, both are morally responsible for what Thomas did, at least to the extent that commanders

are morally responsible for what their soldiers do when faithfully following their orders. Yet Jonas retains the standing to blame Thomas.

Similar cases might be constructed for Cohen's other imagined responses. In each case, one might be "involved in" (and thereby morally responsible for) the relevant wrongdoing in the alleged way, yet retain the standing to blame. In these cases, we might say something like:

- Yes, I helped you to do it – but that was because I had no other choice. You should have refused my help.
- Yes, I asked you to do it – but that was because [...]. You shouldn't have done what I asked.
- Yes, I gave you the means to do it, but that was because [...]. You still shouldn't have done what you did.

The result: if the involvement is faultless, then, very plausibly, it does not, in itself, remove one's standing to blame. It is, at most, only a particular *kind* of involvement that removes standing – a kind that indicates something *further*. What, then, is this something further?

A natural suggestion is that involvement removes standing only when it indicates a lack of commitment to the values that would condemn the wrongdoer's actions. (I will not attempt fully to analyze the sort of commitment at issue; however, it consists, minimally, in *endorsement* of the value as a genuine value, together with at least some degree of *motivation* oneself to act in accordance with the value.) Consider Steffen. What is it, exactly, that is so problematic about Steffen's purporting now to blame Thomas for sounding the alarm, after having commanded him to do so? It is, presumably, that the very fact that Steffen commanded Thomas to do so is excellent *evidence* of something, viz., Steffen's own *endorsement* (or at the very least: non-condemnation) of Thomas' actions. On being confronted by the allies after the war, for instance, Steffen cannot – on pain of the sheerest hypocrisy – now turn around and criticize Thomas for what he did, unless, at a minimum, he is prepared now also to condemn himself. Absent some strong indication of such a moral transformation, however, Thomas would be entitled to reject Steffen's criticism as entirely hypocritical – as motivated only by an attempt to save his own skin, say, or anyway not by concern for the given victims. But note: here the worry turns out to be in the arena of

“hypocrisy” – that Steffen’s purported condemnation of Thomas would have to be (in some relevant sense) hypocritical, or in bad moral faith. And now we are back to the non-hypocrisy condition. Steffen’s “involvement” in what Thomas did has dropped out.

At this stage, then, we may begin to see the fundamental similarity of the two sorts of “replies” Cohen identifies – a similarity Cohen’s discussion seems to obscure. In essence, we have two versions of what is fundamentally the same response:

Who are you to blame me? Your *past behavior* reveals your own non-commitment to the values that would condemn what I did.

Who are you to blame me? Your *involvement* in my action reveals your own non-commitment to the values that would condemn what I did.

What we have here, then, are simply two different sources of evidence of one and the same thing. But it is, plausibly, this one thing that removes standing.

At this point, then, we may note the following. What is important concerning someone’s standing is not whether that person is involved in one’s wrongdoing, but what that involvement *says* about that person’s values and moral commitments. As concerns God’s standing to blame, then, the question becomes this: whether, despite God’s providential activities, God can plausibly still be morally committed to the values that would condemn what we do. With this in mind, I turn now to assess whether God has the moral standing to blame, on open theism, and on theological determinism.

Open Theism

The basic thrust of open theism is as follows. God is omnipotent, and omniscient, but, since incompatibilism is true, and not even God could know in advance the outcome of a genuinely indeterministic process, not even God can know in advance what a free agent would do in a circumstance in which she is free. Thus, God’s creative activities are not informed by a knowledge of what free agents will do in response to the circumstances God creates. God nevertheless judges that it is worth creating such free agents, but in doing so takes a risk – the risk that they will act badly. And we have, in fact, acted badly. Of course,

much more could be said about the “theological” picture motivating open theism. But the following point seems to be in order: open theism, we might say, is a model of providence invented precisely in order to secure God’s standing to blame. First, so long as free will is possible to give, then, on open theism, God gives us free will. And God’s “involvement” in our wrong actions is, apparently, limited simply to creating the general *circumstances* in which we act, and not preventing us from acting in those ways.¹⁴ Accordingly, the *standing* of the God of open theism is not often challenged.¹⁵ In fact, I have been able to locate only one such challenge – or something close to it – in the literature. In a recent essay, Derk Pereboom writes:

But even given libertarianism about our free will and Open Theism, such [divine] expressions of frustration would often have to be misleading as well. A study from New Zealand released in 2002 indicates that 85 percent of boys who have a weakened version of a gene that controls production of an enzyme called monoamine oxidase A – which breaks down key neurotransmitters linked with mood, aggression, and pleasure – and who were abused turned to criminal or antisocial behavior. Open Theists hold that God could have prevented the genetic defect, and could also have prevented the violence. Wouldn’t God’s expressing

¹⁴ For an exposition and defense of the open theist model of providence, see especially Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, and Geach, *Providence and Evil*. For criticism, see, e.g., Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation* Chapter 4. Open theism is also often motivated philosophically simply on grounds that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. For this sort of defence of open theism, see Prior, “The Formalities of Omniscience,” Lucas, *The Future*, Todd, “Prepunishment and Explanatory Dependence,” Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* Chapter 10, and van Inwagen, “What does an omniscient being know about the future.” For further discussion of the problem of foreknowledge and freedom, see, e.g., Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge*, and Todd and Fischer, “Introduction,” (in Fischer and Todd, *Freedom, Fatalism, and Foreknowledge*).

¹⁵ However, philosophers do sometimes contend (e.g., Flint, *Divine Providence*, 104 - 105, Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation*, xii) that open theism makes the problem of evil *worse*.

frustration with their behavior also seem somewhat disingenuous? More generally, many people have natural dispositions that incline them to bad behavior, while others do not. Wouldn't most divine expression of frustration with especially bad behavior be suspect, given that God could have created all of us with the best sort of dispositions we find among human beings?¹⁶

The response to one aspect of Pereboom's challenge seems clear: God would tailor God's expressions of frustration precisely to the degree that is warranted by the degree of blameworthiness in question. Indeed, this much is guaranteed, one might say, by God's perfect moral goodness, together with God's omniscience. In this case, then, God will of course not express *disproportionate* frustration with the behavior of the relevant boys. However, if the given genetic defect indeed left them *to some degree* responsible, then God will express frustration with them (if he does so) commensurate with that degree. More simply: God is perfectly aware – far more intimately than we are – of what mitigating circumstances affect our blameworthiness. And God takes these circumstances perfectly and precisely into account when and if God blames us.

Of course, there is another aspect of Pereboom's challenge, and that is simply that God has failed to *prevent* the relevant instances of wrongdoing. And how can one appropriately express frustration towards what one was in position to prevent but decided not to prevent? More particularly, Pereboom's discussion suggests the following sort of principle:

If one was in position to prevent someone's morally wrong action, but one intentionally does not prevent that person's action, then one cannot appropriately blame that person for performing that action.

But this principle seems false. Suppose a terrorist credibly threatens Nigel: kill those 5 people, or I will kill these 20. Nigel deliberates, and is in position to prevent the terrorist's wrong action of killing the 20. He doesn't, on grounds that he has a policy of not giving in to this kind of moral blackmail. But, when the terrorist does in fact kill the 20, Nigel is

¹⁶ Pereboom, "Libertarianism and Theological Determinism," 128.

certainly in position to blame him for doing so. (Other examples might be constructed.) The point, then, is this: the mere fact that God hasn't *prevented* the relevant wrongdoing does not, by itself, show that God cannot *criticize* that wrongdoing. In particular, that God did not prevent the wrongdoing does not, by itself, tell us that God does not condemn this wrongdoing. The permission of the wrongdoing may have been *reluctant* permission.

Of course, some will want to say that there is a crucial difference here: whereas Nigel was *justified* in (or had an *excuse* for) not preventing the terrorist's wrong action (at least according to non-consequentialists), God – some will say – has no excuse for failing to prevent our wrong actions. In particular, if God exists as imagined by open theists, then clearly God currently has something like a policy of not preventing all of the wrong actions we may perform. (I do not say that God clearly has a policy of not preventing *any* such actions; perhaps God is indeed, unbeknownst to us, preventing a great deal of wrongdoing that would otherwise occur, but for his actions.) However, certain proponents of the problem of evil may claim that God is not justified in adopting this sort of policy: God should adopt the policy of never allowing anyone ever to perform morally wrong actions. But now the point is clear. Here we are simply considering the problem of evil – or some aspect of the problem of evil. The proponent of this problem may grant that the mere fact that God hasn't prevented the wrongdoing does not imply that God does not condemn this wrongdoing; she may admit that God does condemn it, and appropriately so – and even that therefore God has “standing”. Nevertheless, she maintains that God's decision in this regard is in fact morally wrong. Thus, she contends that, in point of fact, the person we have been calling “God” cannot be God – cannot be, *inter alia*, morally perfect, whether or not this person has standing.

Whether God could be justified in adopting the policy of not always preventing wrongdoing is a question I will not pursue. I simply note that this is a different question than the question whether God has *standing*. And, from the considerations adduced so far, we have no reason, I believe, to say that God lacks the standing to blame, given open theism. At most, what we could claim is that God has mistaken priorities: there is wrongdoing that God should prevent but does not prevent. But not every way of being morally mistaken is a way of lacking *standing*. (“OK, maybe I'm not *perfect*, but that doesn't mean I can't criticize you.”) More particularly, an omnipotent, omniscient creator that leaves agents indeterministically-free to evolve “on their own” may have the moral standing to blame

those agents, if they do wrong, *even if* that creator did something wrong (for instance) in creating those creatures (in those conditions) in the first place, or does something wrong in failing to intervene more radically in their affairs. Whether God *does* do something wrong in this way, is, of course, a complicated question, and open theists have certainly tried to address it. But once more, we do not have a clear reason to suppose that the God of open theism lacks *standing*.

Theological Determinism

I turn now to the “model of providence” that makes God’s standing to blame considerably more difficult to defend: theological determinism. Now, theological determinism is sometimes defined in different ways, and here we might detain ourselves for some time regarding different versions of the view, different versions of “determinism”, and yet more besides. These are difficult matters.¹⁷ Heath White, for instance, has recently defined theological determinism as follows:

Theological determinism: (i) the facts about God’s will wholly determine every other contingent fact, and (ii) the facts about God’s will explain every other contingent fact.¹⁸

And this is a sensible definition – but it doesn’t, in itself, amount to a deterministic “model of providence”. Here, then, I will have recourse to a familiar analogy often employed in these contexts: the analogy of an author and a script.¹⁹ On theological determinism, God constructs an entire “script” representing a complete universe, and then, well, brings that

¹⁷ For some of the various complexities regarding “determinism” in this context, see Byerly, *The Mechanics of Divine Foreknowledge and Providence*, 81 – 90.

¹⁸ White, “Theological Determinism and the ‘Authoring Sin’ Objection,” 81.

¹⁹ E.g., Ross, *Philosophical Theology*, 257 – 269. White (“Theological Determinism,” 81) also endorses the analogy, so long as we keep in mind, as surely we must, that “God does not create representations of agents but the real thing.”

script to life. (We might also say that God *inspects* all of the possible scripts – they are just there – and then decides to make one of them *actual*. I'm indifferent.) The theological determinist adds that this script is the best of all – or anyway amongst the best of all – possible scripts. (The idea here, I hope, is familiar.) Further, and crucially, the theological determinist is a *compatibilist*.²⁰ Accordingly, though God determines the script to unfold “as written”, we are, nevertheless, free and responsible. In short: God writes the script in such a way that we meet all of the compatibilist's conditions on freedom and responsibility. The theological determinist thus contends that we are responsible for what we do, despite being determined, in this way, by God.

Now, if we employ the analogy of author and script, and if we understand “moral standing” as we have above, the crucial question is this: what can we gather about the character and values of an *author* by inspection of that author's *story*? And here we must insist on the following point: from the mere fact that an author includes some given action in a “script”, it does not follow that that author approves of that action (or such actions), considered in itself (or themselves). Making this crucial point, Ross writes as follows:

It should be obvious that ‘God wills that Jones stab Smith’ does not entail ‘God approves of Jones’ conduct in his act of stabbing Smith’.²¹

And this opens up the space to see how, on theological determinism, God might nevertheless have the moral standing to blame. Now, no one, as far as I have been able to see, has articulated a complaint against theological determinism *precisely* on grounds that it cannot accommodate God's *moral standing* to blame. The author that has, in my opinion, come *nearest* to articulating this problem, however, is William Hasker.²² In his paper, “The

²⁰ Derk Pereboom (“Libertarianism and Theological Determinism”), however, defends an *incompatibilist* version of theological determinism, on which we simply aren't morally responsible (in what he calls the “basic desert” sense).

²¹ Ross, *Philosophical Theology*, 263.

²² Something in the *neighbourhood* of this problem is often hinted at, but not fully addressed. For instance, Frederick Vivian writes: “The Calvinists and the Jansenists fully realised the contradiction

Antinomies of Divine Providence,” Hasker considers two such “antinomies”, the first of which is the familiar problem of how God’s control can be consistent with *our* control, and the second of which is the “antinomy of divine planning and pathos”. Concerning this latter antinomy, Hasker writes:

[The antinomy] may be stated as follows: *God has a detailed plan for everything that occurs in the world, yet God exhibits powerful affective responses to the various things that take place.*

Unlike the antinomy of divine and human control, this antinomy does not even have the appearance of a formal contradiction. Yet there does seem to be at the very least a strong incongruity: if everything that happens is in accord with God’s plan, then why is God so powerfully affected by these events when they occur?²³

On reflection, however, Hasker’s concern is not so much how God could have the *moral standing* to blame, but why it is that God *would even blame* in the first place. Nevertheless, in considering God’s moral standing on theological determinism, it will be important carefully to consider Hasker’s claims. Hasker writes:

If indeed God has a detailed plan for everything that occurs in the world, and everything that takes place is strictly in accord with that plan, then how is it possible ... to understand [God’s] anger against sin? ... The situation is particularly difficult for Augustinianism [theological determinism], for on this view *everything that takes place is exactly as God wishes it to be; there is no possible world God would prefer to the actual world in any respect.* If we are told, then, that God has a deep and abiding anger at the unrighteousness that takes place on earth, our only possible response is that this simply cannot be: to represent God as angry and hostile to situations which are

and were prepared to sacrifice free will, undismayed by the absurdity of making God both Creator and Judge.” (*Human Freedom and Responsibility*, 76) For further reflections “in the neighborhood”, see Sommers’ (*Relative Justice*, 73 – 83) discussion of the Calvinist views of Jonathan Edwards, and Le Poidevin, “Autonomous Agents or God’s Automata?”

²³ Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, 158.

exactly as he wishes them to be, is just incoherent – or worse, it is to represent God as afflicted with something like schizophrenia.²⁴

Now, an important part of what Hasker says here is simply false. Hasker says that, on theological determinism, there is no possible world God would prefer to the actual world *in any respect*. But this is false. God might – and, I think, certainly would – prefer some other given possible worlds to the actual world *in certain respects*. For instance: God might prefer some other possible world in this respect: it doesn't contain Jones' lie, whereas this world (the actual world) does. That, God agrees, is a good-making feature of that other world as opposed to this one. What follows instead from theological determinism is simply that there is no world that God prefers to the actual world *all things considered*. Some other worlds may be vastly preferable to the actual world in this respect or other. It is just that no other world is preferable to the actual world *in total* or *in the final analysis*. Hasker has simply misrepresented the commitments of the theological determinist.

The problem of divine “schizophrenia”, then, can be dissolved. It isn't as if, at first, when God is constructing the story of the world, God has a preference for (or otherwise enjoys the thought of) lies, and so includes some lies in the relevant “script” for that reason. No. *All along*, God does not like (that is, condemns) lies. But what God *also* likes – and is justified in liking – is an overall excellent script, and God realizes that the best overall script will be one that includes some lies; so God includes them. When those lies in fact come to pass, precisely as God determined, no sudden attitude change is required in order for God to condemn them: God needn't go from having *preferred* or *endorsed* lying to now *condemning* lying. God never endorsed lying to begin with, and God has condemned lying all along. Importantly: from the mere fact that God has included some lies in the relevant script, it does not follow that God approves of (or otherwise endorses) lying. So it seems that what Hasker says could not possibly be could easily be.

Hasker, however, is not alone in suspecting that there would have to be a deep attitudinal tension in God, according to traditional theological determinism.²⁵ Albert Einstein, for instance, once wrote as follows:

²⁴ Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, 160.

Nobody, certainly, will deny that the idea of the existence of an omnipotent, just, and omnibenevolent personal God is able to accord man solace, help, and guidance... But, on the other hand, there are decisive weaknesses attached to this idea in itself, which have been painfully felt since the beginning ... if this being is omnipotent then every occurrence, including every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration, is also his work. How is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an almighty Being? In giving out punishments and rewards he would be ... passing judgment on himself.²⁶

Now, Einstein was, of course, Einstein – but here he can be seen to be making a mistake. First, note that Einstein asks what seems to be a reasonable question: in virtue of the fact that every human action is determined by God, how could it be reasonable to hold human beings responsible? This is, however, simply the question of the incompatibilist. (Note, in particular, that Einstein does not ask how it is possible *for God* to hold humans responsible, but how this is possible *simpliciter*.) But even if Einstein's question is a reasonable one,

²⁵ Cf. Jerry Walls, "One Hell of a Problem for Christian Compatibilists," 89: "The notion that God is angry at sins he himself determines, when he could have determined things otherwise, and then pours out his wrath on those same actions is puzzling in the extreme, to say the least." Walls here seems to be intimating that there is puzzle concerning how the relevant set of divine attitudes is coherent or consistent. It is this complaint that I believe has an adequate answer. Note: even though Walls is an incompatibilist, the implication of this passage does not seem to be simply that it is puzzling how God might regard it as *fair* to blame or punish people for performing actions he determined them to perform. What is puzzling, according to this suggestion, is something like the (alleged) attitudinal change that would have to be required in order for God to condemn what he had previously determined. Hasker makes similar points elsewhere in his work, e.g. *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God*, 133.

²⁶ Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, 26 – 27.

Einstein's further contention seems to be misplaced. Here Einstein contends that "In giving out punishments and rewards he would be ... passing judgment on himself." But this is false.

To explain. Suppose that theological determinism is true, and God criticizes Jones for lying. Is God therefore judging *himself* for lying? Of course not; God didn't lie. Of course, God *did* bring it about that Jones will lie, but to bring it about that someone will lie is not thereby to lie (let alone oneself to perform numerically the same action as the action brought about).²⁷ Perhaps, then, the idea is that, if God passes judgment on Jones for lying, God would have to pass judgment on himself for *bringing it about* that Jones lies. But here we must be careful. For whereas God will accept *responsibility* for bringing it about that Jones lies (given theological determinism, this much cannot be denied), God will not – naturally – *criticize* himself for bringing this about. Indeed, if anything, God will congratulate himself, since God recognizes that Jones's lying (at the relevant time and in the relevant way) is an essential part of the overall excellent script the realization of which God is executing.

Now, some may wish to say that this contention is implausible – that it is implausible that a lie would be, in this way, a necessary part of the best (or one of the best...) of all possible worlds (or perhaps that, even if it were, God would be permitted to bring it about). But here, once more, we simply encounter a different problem: the problem of evil. The important point, at this stage, is the following: there is no reason, given theological determinism, that in criticizing Jones for lying, in order to maintain psychological consistency, God would also have to be (implausibly) criticizing himself. For whereas *creatures* do something wrong when they act wrongly, God will maintain that he does not do wrong when *he* acts so as to bring about those wrongs, given their role in the overall fabric of reality. At the very least, it is *this* thesis that Einstein ought to target, if he wants to object to traditional theism. But to target this thesis is to take up the problem of evil; it is to challenge the thesis that God could be morally perfect, given that God sometimes determines wrongdoing. The seeming problem of attitudinal consistency – that God would be "judging himself" – has disappeared.

²⁷ Cf. Ross, *Philosophical Theology*, 261: "God does not pick a man's pocket when I do or help a blind man across the street when I do."

But perhaps we should slow down. For I seem to be saying that there can be no moral objection to God's both determining creatures to perform various wrong actions *and* blaming them for performing those actions, whereas I expect that many readers will suppose that there is indeed – there must be! – available such an objection. But my point here is not that there can be no such moral objection. My point, instead, is that *given compatibilism* there can be no such objection.

Paul Russell, himself a naturalist and a compatibilist, however, disagrees. Russell's position is as follows. As concerns our own responsibility, there is no morally important difference between the deterministic causes of our actions just *being there* and their instead being there as a result of someone's agency. Naturalist compatibilists, he thinks, therefore must admit that human moral responsibility is – in principle – compatible with the truth of a doctrine like theological determinism.²⁸ Now, if you think that this result, in itself, is a bad result for compatibilists, then you agree with contemporary incompatibilists who have developed so-called “manipulation arguments” for incompatibilism.²⁹ Russell, however, wishes to take at least some of the sting out of this result, by claiming that whereas we may appropriately blame *each other* on such a view, God, at any rate, cannot. As I hope will become clear, however, I do not see that Russell has made a good case for this conclusion. Russell begins as follows:

We might say that since B controls A's agency there is *insufficient causal distance* between them to sustain the reactive stance. Moral communication and responsiveness presupposes that agents are not related to each other as controller and contreee. When a controller takes up an evaluative/reactive stance toward an

²⁸ As other such philosophers regularly do admit. See, e.g., Watson, *Agency and Answerability*, 214 on a Leibnizian God, and Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, 103 – 116 on the same. Neither Watson nor Wolf, however, address the question of what attitudes *God* would or could have towards God's creatures.

²⁹ For more on which see, e.g., Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*, 64 - 78, Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, Chapter 4, Rogers, *Freedom and Self-Creation*, Chapter 1, and Todd, “A New Approach to Manipulation Arguments,” “Defending (a modified version of) the Zygote Argument,” and “Manipulation Arguments and the Freedom to do Otherwise.”

agent he controls there is plainly an element of fraud or self-deception going on. The controller can only praise or blame *himself* for the way in which the agent succeeds or fails to be guided by available reasons.³⁰

There are at least two separate points here. One point is a point to which we have already responded; it is the claim, assessed above, that there is an attitudinal “switch” implied by God’s blame which would have to be incoherent or otherwise “fraudulent”. The second point, however, is a claim about “causal distance”. On this score, when I read Russell’s claim, I think: “Spoken like a true incompatibilist” – except that Russell is not an incompatibilist. On Russell’s view, even though there is “insufficient causal distance” between the controller and the controllee for the controller appropriately to blame, nevertheless the controller *gives the controlled free will*. It is this that I find puzzling – and implausible. Whereas I can certainly understand the claim that there is indeed insufficient causal distance between the relevant parties for blame to be appropriate, this is because I can understand the claim that this lack of distance implies (or is constitutive of) the controlled agent’s lack of freedom. But I cannot understand the claim that there is this “lack of distance”, when the “controlled” party *is indeed free*.

It is worth bringing out here the fundamental weakness of Russell’s compatibilism. If, on your view, God might create a community of agents and give them free will (and make them fully autonomous and responsible), and yet there is “insufficient causal distance” between those creatures and God to license (the in-principle possibility of) God’s holding them responsible, then the problem here is not with God; it is with your conception of free will and moral responsibility. It is far more natural to suppose that there would be such distance *in virtue of* God’s making such creatures genuinely free and responsible. On Russell’s view, though God has indeed given the relevant agents free will, there is *still* a lack of the requisite “causal distance”, and so God can only blame *himself* for how they use it. This is absurd.

In this light, consider the ways in which the incompatibilist will simply *agree* with Russell. Russell writes:

³⁰ Russell, “Selective Hard Compatibilism,” 159.

We may say that when the relationship between two individuals is one involving covert control then the *participant stance* on the side of the *controller* is compromised. The controller is not *entitled* to take a participant stance in circumstances where he decides when reasons, criticisms, and so on succeed or fail to move the agent.³¹

So far, the incompatibilist agrees: when the *controller* decides when reasons do or do not move the agent, certainly the *agent* cannot also be responsible for when she is or is not moved by such reasons, and in that case the controller certainly will not be “entitled” to condemn her for how she is or is not so-moved. But this is not, of course, the interpretation of these facts favored by Russell. Commenting now on the case at hand, Russell writes:

There is something “absurd” about the suggestion that God holds human beings accountable (in a future state) for events that he ordains.³²

Once again, the incompatibilist agrees. There is indeed something absurd about the suggestion that God holds human beings to account for events that he ordains, and that is precisely the suggestion that those human beings could be *responsible* for events God ordains. However, once more, this is not what Russell means to suggest; Russell contends that human beings *could* be responsible for events God ordains. Russell goes on:

However, in the absence of any relationship of this kind [controller and controllee] the participant stance is not compromised. ... What is compromised in these cases is not the agent’s responsibility, as such, but the legitimacy of the stance of *holding* an agent responsible *on the part of those who covertly control him*.³³

Russell’s contention, then, is that *others* may legitimately blame the controlled agent, although the controllers themselves cannot. Russell explains:

³¹ Russell, “Selective Hard Compatibilism,” 160.

³² Russell, “Selective Hard Compatibilism,” 161.

³³ Russell, “Selective Hard Compatibilism,” 160.

It is indeed illegitimate and inappropriate for *God* to hold humans accountable in these circumstances, insofar as God covertly controls us and all we do. [However] it does not follow from the fact that God is in no position to hold us accountable that we are not (fully) accountable to our fellow *human beings* in these circumstances.³⁴

Russell is right. It doesn't directly follow from God's not being entitled to hold us responsible that we simply aren't responsible. (This is, indeed, precisely the upshot of the literature on moral standing.) The problem is that Russell has not *explained* why God is not entitled to hold us responsible, despite – on his view – making us responsible. *Why* does God lack such entitlement? What principle or principles regarding the “moral standing to blame” would imply that God is not so-entitled? So far, all we have is the suggestion that there is something “fraudulent” about God's stance – but we have seen how such an objection may be answered. We are simply left with the mere suggestion that there is something “absurd” about God's holding human beings responsible for events God ordains. But whereas there is at hand a ready explanation of this absurdity, this explanation is that of the incompatibilist.

Here, then, we reach the following conclusion: compatibilists ought simply to embrace the result that God might have the moral standing to blame those God determines. This is, I suggest, the best, and the most principled, compatibilist option available. Such a conclusion, of course, has long since been endorsed by various central philosophical figures in western theism – and is sometimes similarly embraced in recent times. Donald M. Mackay, for instance, once wrote:

Insofar as the parallel holds between human and Divine authorship, the foregoing [compatibilist] analysis may help to draw the fatalistic sting commonly felt in the theological doctrine of predestination; but we may still feel that if God is our sovereign Author, we cannot be held really responsible – at least not by Him.³⁵

³⁴ Russell, “Selective Hard Compatibilism,” 161 – 162.

³⁵ Mackay, *Freedom of Action in a Mechanistic Universe*, 33.

Mackay, however, ultimately rejects this (he thinks pessimistic) conclusion, writing that

Logically, we can depend for our existence upon the ‘creative’ will of God-in-eternity, and still be answerable for our response as free beings to the ‘normative’ will of God-in-dialogue.³⁶

There are, to be sure, and as Mackay recognizes, still mysteries associated with this doctrine, not all of which I have discussed in this essay. But this doctrine is, I suggest, the most attractive position for *any* compatibilist to take – whether theist or not. Compatibilists should, I submit, be compatibilists all the way through. If, however, this doctrine is, for you, one step too far, then the result is this: for you, compatibilism is one step too far.

Conclusion

It is worth recapping where we’ve been in this paper. One of the most difficult and contentious questions in the history of western theism has always been whether divine providence is consistent with creaturely responsibility. Traditional theists, however, do not merely wish to say that we *are* responsible, but further wish to say that God *holds* us responsible. But here we encounter deep and difficult questions regarding *standing* – questions that are just beginning to get the attention they deserve. As I hope this essay has made clear, however, the question of *God’s* standing has not yet received this sort of detailed attention. As I see it, the problem of God’s standing deserves explicit recognition as a central problem in the philosophy religion. The problem is not how God could be responsible for wrongdoing. The problem is not how God could be perfect, given the facts of evil. The problem is how it could be appropriate for *God* to blame us, given how intimately involved God is in what we do. Perhaps, the theological determinists may say, ignoring this problem

³⁶ Mackay, *Freedom of Action in a Mechanistic Universe*, 34.

is yet one more mistake which God has determined us to make, but is nevertheless disappointed in us for making. Whatever the case: we should make it no more.³⁷

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