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ON THE DIVINE NATURE AND THE NATURE OF DIVINE FREEDOM

Thomas B. Talbott

In my paper, I defend a view that many would regard as self-evidently false: the view that God's freedom, his power to act, is in no way limited by his essential properties. I divide the paper into five sections. In section i, I call attention to a special class of non-contingent propositions and try to identify an important feature of these propositions; in section ii, I provide some initial reasons, based in part upon the unique features of these special propositions, for thinking that God does have the power to perform actions which his essential properties entail he will never perform; in section iii, I call into question the assumption that a person has the power to do something only if it is logically possible that he will exercise that power; and, finally, in sections iv and v, I try to specify a sense in which divine freedom and the kind of human freedom required by the Free will Defense are in fact the same kind of freedom.

If God is a necessary being and in possession of certain essential properties of the sort that an Anselmian would attribute to him, then a good many unexpected propositions will turn out to be necessarily true and a good many others necessarily false. Take, for instance,

(1) There exists a favorable balance of good over evil

and

(2) At the year 2000 every creature will begin an eternity of endless torment.

If God exists in all possible worlds and is both omnipotent and loving in all possible worlds, then it may turn out that (1) is true and (2) is false in all possible worlds. So it may turn out that (1) is necessarily true and (2) is necessarily false. But if (1) *is* necessarily true, does it follow that God is somehow powerless to bring it about that (1) is false?—and if (2) *is* necessarily false, does it follow that God is powerless to bring it about that (2) is true? In this paper, I shall argue that no such consequences follow. I shall argue that, with respect to a special class of necessarily true propositions, God does have the (unexercised) power to bring it about that these propositions are false; and similarly, with respect to a special class of necessarily false propositions, he has the (unexercised) power to bring it about that these propositions are true. What is at stake here, of

course, is how one should conceive of divine freedom and, more generally, how one should conceive of the freedom of any agent. Even compatibilists, after all, are apt to assume that an agent *S* is free with respect to an action *A* only if it is logically possible that *S* does *A* *and* logically possible that *S* refrains from *A*. But in this paper I shall call into question that assumption, at least in so far as it applies to God. I shall suggest that God's freedom, his power to act, is in no way limited by his essential properties; for though his essential properties do entail that he will not act in certain ways and do entail that there is no possible world in which he acts in certain ways, they do not entail that he is *powerless* to act in those ways.

I should perhaps say at the outset that I fully appreciate how absurd my thesis is apt to appear, at least initially. Isn't it just obvious, just self-evident, that no one has the power to actualize a logically impossible state of affairs? According to most philosophers, this is indeed self-evident. In an exceptionally fine discussion of divine omnipotence, for instance, Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso write:

Our second condition [of adequacy for *any* analysis of omnipotence] is that an omnipotent being should be expected to have the power to actualize a state of affairs *p* only if it is logically possible that someone actualize *p*, i.e., only if there is a possible world *W* such that in *W* someone actualizes *p*. We take this claim to be self-evident.¹

I shall argue, however, that what Flint and Freddoso (and many others) take to be self-evident is not only not self-evident but quite false. I shall divide the discussion into five sections. In section i, I shall call attention to a special class of non-contingent propositions and try to identify an important feature of these propositions; in section ii, I shall provide some initial reasons, based in part upon the unique features of these special propositions, for thinking that God does have the power to perform actions which his essential properties entail he will never perform; in section iii, I shall call into question the assumption that a person has the power to do something only if it is logically possible that he will exercise that power; and, finally, in sections iv and v, I shall try to specify a sense in which divine freedom and the kind of human freedom required by the Free Will Defense are in fact the same kind of freedom.

i

Thanks to the work of Alvin Plantinga in particular, we no longer make the mistake of assuming that God (an essentially omnipotent being) can actualize just any possible state of affairs or bring about the truth of just any contingent proposition.² But most contemporary philosophers do, I believe, make a mistake

in the opposite direction; they assume (incorrectly, I believe) that even God is powerless to actualize an impossible state of affairs or to bring it about that a necessarily false proposition is in fact true. That assumption is, of course, a very natural one and one that I have always made in the past; indeed, I still make it with respect to a particular class of impossible states of affairs and a particular class of necessarily false propositions. Unlike some Cartesians, perhaps, I assume that not even God could create a square circle or a material object without spatial dimensions, and not even God could bring it about that

$$(3) 2 + 2 = 5$$

is in fact true. I assume, furthermore, that no one, not even God, brings it about that (3) is false either, nor does anyone bring it about that

$$(4) 2 + 2 = 4$$

is true. A necessary falsehood such as (3) is simply false in all possible worlds, and there is no world *W* in which some agent in *W* actually brings it about that (3) is false; and similarly for (4): (4) is simply true in all possible worlds, and there is no world *W'* in which some agent in *W'* actually brings it about that (4) is true.

But (1) and (2) above are, it seems, quite different from (3) and (4) in this regard. If (1) is true at all in the actual world, it is true (given our assumptions about God) for this reason: in the actual world God brings it about that (1) is true. Indeed, the means by which God brings this about in the actual world will be quite different from those by which he brings this about in some other possible world. In the actual world, for instance, God has presumably created persons with the capacity to enjoy sexual pleasure, and this may in fact contribute to the truth of (1); but in other worlds, we may safely assume, he will eschew this means altogether. And consider this oddity. By performing an action (or set of actions) in the actual world, God may bring it about that (1) is true, but he could hardly thereby bring it about that (1) is true in all other possible worlds. So if (1) is necessarily true, God does not bring it about that (1) is *necessarily* true; he simply acts in the actual world so as to bring it about that (1) is true. Of course in every world in which he exists (which is every world) God does guarantee the truth of (1); so we can say, perhaps, that the necessity of (1) rests in some way upon the nature or character of God. But since God can do nothing in the actual world to guarantee that (1) is true in all other possible worlds, he evidently does not bring it about that (1) is *necessarily* true, though he does bring it about that (1) is true.³

Now similar remarks can be made concerning the falsity of (2). Even if (2) is necessarily false, it is God who arranges things in the actual world in such a way that (2) is false; so it is God who brings it about that (2) is false. Or consider

- (5) God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, and then God broke that promise.

If (5) is necessarily false, as I think it is, there are nonetheless several different ways in which God might have brought about its falsity. He might simply never have created Abraham in the first place; or he might never have made a promise to Abraham; or he might have created Abraham and made a promise to him, as most Jews and Christians believe, and then have affected history in such a way that the promise was kept. And there are, of course, many different ways in which God might have so affected history that the promise was kept.

It seems clear, therefore, that one can distinguish, at least roughly, between two kinds of necessary truths and two kinds of necessary falsehoods. With respect to some necessarily true propositions, such as (4), no one, not even God, *brings it about* that these propositions are true; but with respect to others, such as (1), God does bring it about that they are true. Similarly, with respect to some necessarily false propositions, such as (3), no one brings it about that these propositions are false; but with respect to others, such as (2) or (5), God does bring it about that they are false. So if God is a necessary being who possesses certain essential properties, then there is a special class of non-contingent propositions. These propositions, though true in all possible worlds or false in all possible worlds, are nonetheless similar to contingent propositions in this respect: their truth or falsity depends, in a sense that will have to be specified, upon how God chooses to act in the world.

ii

Because God actually brings it about that

- (1) There exists a favorable balance of good over evil

is true and that

- (2) At the year 2000 every creature will begin an eternity of endless torment.

is false, it is plausible to conclude, I think, that God also has the power to bring it about that (1) is false and (2) is true. It does not in general follow, to be sure, that a person with the power to bring it about that a proposition *p* is true also has the power to bring it about that *p* is false. Even if at T_1 Smith has the power to fling a rock through a particular window and thus bring it about that

- (6) The window is broken at T_2

is true, he may not have the power to bring it about that (6) is false; he may not

have this power because some other person, or perhaps even an earthquake, may have shattered the window in the event that Smith had not. In the case of a proposition such as (1), however, *God* has the power to bring it about that (1) is true, I believe, only if he also has the power to bring it about that (1) is false; and in the case of a proposition such as (2), *God* has the power to bring it about that (2) is false only if he also has the power to bring it about that (2) is true. For consider this principle:

- (P₁) It is possible that someone has the power to bring it about that a proposition *p* is true if, and only if, it is possible that someone has the power to bring it about that *p* is false.

If this principle is true, as I think it is, then God seemingly does have the power to bring it about that (1) is false and (2) is true; and he has this power even though (1) is necessarily true and (2) is necessarily false. This can perhaps be shown as follows. If God does bring it about that (1) is true, then he of course has *the power* to bring it about that (1) is true; if he has the power to bring it about that (1) is true, then it is *possible* that someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is true; and if it is possible that someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is true, then (according to (P₁)) it is also possible that someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is false. So God brings it about that (1) is true only if it is possible that someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is false. But of course it is possible that someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is false only if there is a possible world in which someone has that power, and no one other than God, it would seem, is even a plausible candidate at this point. If God exists and is omnipotent in every world, then in every world it is God who determines the *overall* balance of good and evil. Since, moreover, God is also morally perfect in every world in which he exists, there must be some world in which God has the power to do something—such as bring it about that (1) is false—which his essential properties entail he will never exercise. And if there is *some* world in which God has that power, we may safely conclude, I think, that the actual world is one of them; we may safely conclude this because, though some of God's powers do vary from world to world (particularly those he has in worlds containing free agents), there seems to be no reason why *this* power would be one of them. If (P₁) is true, therefore, God does have powers which his essential properties entail he will never exercise.⁴

But is (P₁) in fact true? It certainly seems to hold for such non-contingent propositions as (3) and (4) above; it is impossible, for instance, that someone has the power to bring it about that

$$(4) \quad 2 + 2 = 4$$

is false, and it is likewise impossible, therefore, that someone has the power to

bring it about that this proposition is true. (P_1) also seems to hold for contingent propositions. It could hardly be possible that someone has the power to bring it about that a contingent proposition p is true unless it were also possible that someone has the power to bring it about that p is false; and if it is impossible that someone should *now* have the power to bring it about that

(7) Columbus sailed for America in 1492

is false, as many would insist, it is also impossible that someone should *now* have the power to *bring it about* that (7) is true. As one might expect, however, the controversial cases are such propositions as (1), (2), and (5) above—propositions which, though non-contingent (given certain assumptions), share some of the properties of contingent propositions. Not only does God bring it about that the universe contains a favorable balance of good over evil and hence bring it about that (1) is true: it seems that any specific act he performs in his effort to bring this about is one he has the power not to perform. And there is, no doubt, a collection of *specific* acts within God's power to perform which, if taken as a collection, would result in an unfavorable balance of evil over good in the universe. If, indeed, God has the power to cause every creature to experience a fleeting instant of suffering, or perhaps two or three such fleeting instants, why should he not also have the power (if not the will) to keep it up for an eternity? Why should he not also have the power to bring it about that (2) is true?

Of course it may be within God's power to perform an action A and also within his power to perform an action B, but not within his power to do *both A and B*; similarly, it may be within God's power to cause a person S to experience pain during any given instant of S's life, but not within his power to cause S to experience pain continuously throughout every instant of S's life. Two or more actions that are individually possible may not be jointly compossible. But still, *some* explanation must be given for this fact: it is God who brings it about that—who is actually responsible for the fact that—(1) is true and (2) is false. It is God who is responsible for this even though (1) is necessarily true and (2) is necessarily false. Now how are we to explain this fact? Since there are no worlds in which (1) is false, how are we to explain the fact that the truth of (1) actually depends upon actions of God?—and since there are no worlds in which (2) is true, how are we to explain the fact that the falsity of (2) actually depends upon actions of God. I propose to explain it this way. Though it is, in the fullest sense, within God's power to bring it about that (1) is false and (2) is true, he has chosen not to exercise that power. He has chosen rather to bring it about that (1) is true and (2) is false. There is, to be sure, no possible world in which God exercises his power to bring it about that (1) is false, nor is there any in which he exercises his power to bring it about that (2) is true. But that implies no limitation whatsoever upon his power to act. Here we must distinguish carefully

between the “could” of power and the “could” of logical possibility. God *could* bring it about that (1) is false in this sense: he has the power to do so. But the proposition, *God brings it about that (1) is false*, could not itself be true for this reason: it is simply not possible that God, a perfectly loving being, would exercise his power to make it true. In other words, whether God has the power to do something is one question; whether it is possible that he would ever want to exercise that power is another. That God has the power to do something does not entail even the possibility that he would ever want to exercise that power.

But how could God have the power to do something, one might ask, if it is impossible for him to exercise that power? The answer is that it is quite possible for God to exercise the relevant power in this sense: he has the power to exercise his power to do it. If God has the power to do something, then he has the power to exercise his power to do it. It is just that, with respect to some of his powers, he does not want to exercise them; it is not even possible that he would want to exercise them, so it is not even possible that he will exercise them. But he could exercise these powers if he wanted to; and since, moreover, his refusal to exercise these powers is in no way determined by antecedent causal conditions outside his control, he is, in the fullest sense, free to exercise them. He is, in the fullest sense, free to exercise his power to bring about certain impossible states of affairs.

iii

According to some libertarians (though perhaps not all), it is within the power of a person S to perform an action A at a time T only if at T it is causally possible for S to do A; and here it is tempting, perhaps, to regard that which is causally possible as a sub-class of that which is logically possible. If one accepts a basically libertarian conception of free agency, therefore, one might conclude that God himself has the power to do A at T only if it is logically possible that he should exercise that power. But this inference is, I now believe, a mistake.

We must ask, first of all, what it means to say that an event is causally possible. What libertarians want to deny is simply that our free actions are *causally determined*, and their point is essentially this negative one: If it is causally determined that I will perform an action A, then it is causally impossible for me to refrain from A; and if it is causally impossible for me to refrain from A, then I am in fact powerless to refrain from A. But my doing A is a free act only if it is both within my power to do A and within my power to refrain from A; so if my doing A is causally determined, it is not a free act. Now consider the following definitions:

(D₁) An event E is causally impossible at a time T if, and only if,

there exist at T conditions that are causally sufficient for the non-occurrence of E.

- (D₂) An event E is causally possible at a time T if, and only if, E is not causally impossible at T.

Though perhaps not adequate for all purposes, these definitions are, it seems, fully adequate for the purpose of making the libertarian's rather negative point about determinism. But given these definitions, one cannot regard that which is causally possible as simply a sub-class of that which is logically possible. For consider an action A, perhaps a very malicious act, that God never performs in any possible world. Even if God does A in no world whatsoever and his doing A is therefore logically impossible, his doing A remains causally possible in the sense specified by (D₂); nothing God does, after all, not even that which flows from the necessity of his own nature, is causally determined, and there are no causal conditions that prevent him from doing anything he chooses not to do. God himself, being the First Cause, may cause the heavens and the earth to exist, but nothing causes him to cause the heavens and the earth to exist. Even if it should turn out to be a necessary truth that God creates a physical universe of some kind or another—and I suspect it is—nothing causes him to create a universe of any kind. Certainly God's will can be thought of as an expression of his own character and nature—indeed his character traits can perhaps be thought of as simply descriptions of how he wills—but the one who creates every causal law is not himself causally determined in any of his actions. He is, in fact, the freest of all free agents.

A theist, therefore, who accepts my thesis that God has power that his essential properties entail he will never exercise can still be a libertarian in the matter of free agency; and furthermore, a Christian theist who rejects that thesis must confront some very awkward theological consequences. For consider, first of all, the second person of the Trinity, the eternally begotten Son of God who, according to Christian theology, was incarnated in the flesh. One who insists that an agent has the power to do something only if there is a possible world in which he does it, must confront this consequence: either there is a possible world in which the Son succumbs to temptation and sins or the Son is not free to sin and is not, therefore, a free *moral* agent. But if the Son does succumb to temptation and sin in some possible world, it is hard to make sense of the claim that he is not only human but also divine; and if he is *not* a free moral agent, it is hard to make sense of the claim that he is not only divine but also human. In the latter case, it is also hard to make sense of the claim that "in every respect [he] has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Hebrews 4:15). Now one might feel as if the doctrine of the incarnation already presents so many logical perplexities that one more is of little concern, but a Christian theologian

can avoid a blatant contradiction at this point simply by accepting the thesis of this paper—simply by denying that God's power to do something implies the logical possibility that he will exercise that power.

Or consider, secondly, the biblical account of the flood, and assume, just for purposes of illustration, that this account is historically accurate. Assume, in other words, that God once destroyed the entire population of the earth, except for Noah, his family, and the others in the ark; and assume further that God then promised never again so to destroy the earth, sealing his promise with a rainbow. If God is necessarily true to his word—if, that is, there is no possible world in which he breaks a promise—does it follow that he is now powerless to destroy the earth by means of a flood? That would certainly seem to follow if God not only never breaks a promise but is powerless to do so. Given that God has *already* promised never again so to destroy the earth (and given that it is now too late for anyone, even God, to obviate that promise),⁵ God now has the power to destroy the earth *only if* he now has the power to break a promise. But if every divine power must be exercised in some possible world, then God is indeed powerless to break a promise and therefore powerless, at this time, to destroy the earth by means of a flood. And is that not a paradoxical consequence? I, at least, would prefer to say that God still has the power to destroy the earth by means of a flood but just does not want to; it is no longer even possible that he would want to exercise that power.

Or consider, finally, this example. An account could be given, presumably, of what it means for God to speak to a person and to communicate propositions in the course of a conversation. Now suppose that Smith is home at a time T_1 , and then leaves his home at a later time T_2 ; that during this entire period of time God is speaking to me through a burning cornstalk in my vegetable garden; and that one of his purposes in communicating with me is to inform me of Smith's whereabouts: at T_1 he informs me that Smith is home and at T_2 he informs me that Smith has left his home. If God is essentially truthful and therefore cannot lie, does it follow that God has the power at T_1 to communicate to me the tensed proposition, *Smith is now at home*, but lacks that power at T_2 ? Again, it seems to me altogether paradoxical to draw any such implication. It seems to me that in any sense in which God has the power to communicate a true proposition, he also has the power to communicate a false proposition; it is just logically impossible that he would ever want to exercise his power to communicate a false proposition.

It will no doubt be objected at this point that I have simply confused two senses of the term "power," or at least that I have confused the *power* to do something with the *ability* and *know-how* to do it. God certainly has the ability, one might argue, to produce another devastating flood, and he certainly knows how to communicate a proposition that happens to be false; but given his essential

properties, there is a more fundamental sense in which he is powerless to make use of that ability. An agent may, after all, have the ability to do something and still lack the power to make use of that ability. A concert violinist, stranded on a deserted island, may retain (for awhile anyway) her *ability* to play the violin; but in the absence of any violin on the island (and the materials to make one), there is a more fundamental sense in which she is powerless to make use of that ability.

The objection, however, seems to me unconvincing and the analogy inappropriate for two reasons. In the first place, the concert violinist (in the situation just described) could not play a violin even if she wanted to, and that is, to be sure, one kind of situation in which a person can be said to have the ability to do something but not the power to make use of that ability. But that is hardly analogous to what I have said about God—who no doubt could, if he wanted to, lie more effectively than any other person that exists. Now the libertarian will of course deny—quite rightly, I believe—that a person *S* has the power to do *A* if and only if *S* would do *A* on the condition that *S* should choose to do *A*. On this score, it seems to me, the libertarian is right and the compatibilist wrong. If *S*'s refraining from *A* is causally determined by factors outside of *S*'s control, then even if *S* would do *A* on the condition that *S* should choose to do *A*, *S* remains, I think, powerless to do *A*. But this brings me to a second (and more important) consideration. In the case of created persons, such as ourselves, who are subject to causal laws, one can sensibly speak of acquired skills and abilities and one can easily imagine a situation in which we are powerless to employ some of our skills and abilities. In our own case, one can sensibly ask, moreover, whether our will has been shaped by, and is therefore dependent upon, causal conditions external to ourselves and over which we have no control; one can sensibly ask whether even our will is something we are responsible for. In the case of God, however, things stand quite differently. In his providential control of history, God does, perhaps, face obstacles of a certain kind; namely the free choices, particularly the evil choices, of created persons. However much God may prefer that I make the right choice in a particular situation, he may be powerless to bring it about that I make the right (free) choice in that situation. But since God has no acquired skills and abilities and is subject to no causal laws, since none of his actions is causally determined at all and therefore none of them is determined by causal conditions beyond his control, it is necessarily true, I think, that God's will is always free and that he is always responsible for it. Certainly the perfection of his own nature could hardly be a *limitation of his power*. In the case of God, therefore, we *can* say that *he* has the power to do *A* if, and only if, he would do *A* on the condition that he should choose to do *A*. We can say this for the following reason: So long as a person's will is not itself under the control of another and not itself shaped by causal conditions

beyond his control, he has the power to do anything he would do on the condition that he should choose to do it.

There is, incidentally, a related issue concerning the moral freedom of perfected saints. According to Augustine, the time will come when the company of the redeemed in heaven will never again disobey God, never again even be *tempted* to disobey God; and this will by no means be a happy accident. The redeemed will, after all, have had their hearts transformed and their minds renewed. They will be in possession of the beatific vision, and they will see clearly both that God is the source of their happiness and that disobedience can produce only greater and greater misery in their lives. It will no longer be possible, therefore—no longer psychologically possible, one might say, though *that* notion is by no means clear—it will no longer be possible for the redeemed to disobey God. But why should such clear vision and moral perfection detract from their moral freedom? Will not the redeemed in heaven retain the power (though not the will) to disobey God? The view that one would lose one's moral freedom at the very moment one becomes wise enough to see that evil is always destructive, always contrary to one's own interest as well as the interest of others—at the very moment that, having been purged of all self-deception and all evil inclinations, one no longer has any evil motives left—would be a remarkable view of moral freedom indeed. What is needed at this point, I think, is a conception of freedom and power that enables us to make three things clear simultaneously: (1) why, in the case of God, his moral perfection in no way limits his *power* to act; (2) why, in the case of created persons, freedom and determinism are logically incompatible; and (3) why, in the case of perfected saints, their *acquired* perfection in no way limits their power to act either. It is to this conception of freedom that I shall turn in the following section.

iv

The conception of freedom and power we are looking for is, I think, something like the following. First of all, I am free with respect to an action A only if it is *both* within my power to do A *and* within my power to refrain from A; that point may not take us very far, but it at least has the virtue of being relatively non-controversial. Beyond that, I am prepared to concede this much to the libertarian. I do something freely only if, in some vague sense, the action in question is truly mine; and the action is truly mine only if, in some reasonably clear sense, it is not imposed upon me from outside, only if it is not causally determined by conditions external to myself and beyond my control. But under what conditions do I have the power to do something that I do not in fact choose to do? Perhaps no analysis will be fully adequate at this point, but the following should at least enable one to claim that divine freedom and the kind of freedom

required by the Free Will Defense are in fact the same kind of freedom:

- (P₂) It is within the power of a person S to perform an action A that S does not, in fact, perform only if (a) S would do A on the condition that S should choose to do A *and* (b) no conditions external to S and beyond S's control are *causally* sufficient for S's not choosing to do A.

Because condition (b) of this principle could never be met for any created person in a fully deterministic universe, the principle clearly requires a basically libertarian conception of human freedom; it requires us to say that no person whose actions are ultimately determined by God, not even one whose actions are an expression of his or her created nature, is truly free. In the case of created persons, it seems, the problem is precisely that their nature is a *created* nature; it must be produced, or developed, or cultivated in one way or another.⁶ So if the nature (or character) of a created person were to be shaped entirely by God, or entirely by causal conditions beyond that person's control, then such a person would have no independence or autonomy at all; such a person would be a mere extension of God, or the universe, or whatever. If God wanted to create independent beings, therefore—what I would regard as true persons with significant moral freedom—he had no choice, I am convinced, but to create beings who are free in the libertarian sense. And a virtue of (P₂) is that it enables us to safeguard just such intuitions as these.

But (P₂) is also consistent with my thesis in this paper concerning the freedom of God. Suppose, first of all, that Spinoza were right and there were but one possible world that God actualizes in accordance with his moral perfection; suppose, in other words, that "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things are determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and act in a certain manner."⁷ According to my thesis in this paper, it would still follow that exactly one free agent exists, namely God, as Spinoza himself insisted and as was reflected in his own definitions for "freedom" and "compulsion":

That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its own nature alone and is determined to action by itself alone. That thing, on the other hand, is called necessary or rather compelled which by another is determined to existence and action in a fixed and prescribed manner.⁸

Like Spinoza, C. S. Lewis also argues, both elegantly and persuasively, that divine freedom does not require logical contingency:

Whatever human freedom means, Divine freedom cannot mean indeterminacy between alternatives and choice of one of them. Perfect goodness can never debate about the end to be obtained, and perfect wisdom

cannot debate about the means most suited to achieve it. The freedom of God consists in the fact that no cause other than Himself produces His acts and no external obstacle impedes them—that His own goodness is the root from which they all grow and His own omnipotence the air in which they all flower.⁹

With respect to divine freedom, then, Lewis agrees with Spinoza; and Spinoza's view is, I believe, essentially correct. An action is free, we have conceded, only when it "belongs" to the agent alone, only when it is performed by an agent whose actions are not determined by any event or set of events external to the agent. Such an action will typically involve two things, among others: at least one event that is caused by the agent alone, and at least one uncaused event. If, for example, I should freely move my arm for the purpose of illustrating a philosophical point, the motion of my arm would no doubt be caused by me, the agent, but the event consisting of my causing my arm to move would not itself be caused by anything at all and certainly not by some other event in the world. As already suggested, however, all of God's actions, even those that express the necessity of his own nature meet these conditions and should, I have argued, be regarded as truly free. And if they *are* truly free, then God has the power, if not the will, to refrain from them.

But if Spinoza's conception of divine freedom is essentially correct, his denial of all contingency in the world is altogether dubious, I think, and, at the very least, inconsistent with Christian theology. Accordingly, let us alter our assumptions in the following way. Let us continue to assume that in this sense there is no contingency in the being of God: with respect to any contingent state of affairs and its complement, God is determined by essential elements in his nature to actualize (in Plantinga's weak sense¹⁰) whichever one is included in the best world he is able to actualize. Let us continue to assume, in other words, that God necessarily actualizes the best world he can and that exactly one world, call it α , qualifies as that world. If α also includes persons who are free in the libertarian sense, then it remains a *contingent fact* that α is a world within God's power to actualize; and if this is a contingent fact, then room still remains, it seems, for an infinite number of different possible worlds. For suppose, to simplify matters, that in a situation S Smith is free with respect to an action A and that the following subjunctive conditionals are both *necessarily true*:

- (8) If Smith should freely do A in S, then God would respond in manner M.
- (9) If Smith should freely refrain from A in S, then God would respond in manner N.

If we suppose further that the antecedent of (8) is in fact true (that Smith freely

chooses to do A in S), it will follow that God's responding in manner M is an expression of essential elements in his nature. Of course we need not suppose that (8) and (9) are necessarily true in order to get that result. If God's responding in manner M were determined not only by how Smith chooses to act, but also by how other free persons choose to act in a variety of other situations as well, God's responding in manner M might express essential elements in his nature even on the assumption that (8) and (9) are contingently true. To simplify matters, however, let us suppose that (8) and (9) are indeed necessarily true. Even so, it remains a contingent fact that Smith freely does A in S and therefore a contingent fact that God acts in manner M; God's action is contingent, one might say, *only because* Smith's action is contingent, but God's action remains contingent nonetheless. There is another possible world in which Smith refrains from A in S and hence God does not act in manner M. Accordingly, even if God exists necessarily and necessarily creates the best world he can—even if there is exactly one such world—there remains, contrary to what Spinoza thought, more than enough room for contingency in the world.¹¹

It seems, then, that one can accept Spinoza's conception of divine freedom without rejecting all contingency in the world. Nonetheless, Spinoza's conception requires at least one qualification, because some of God's choices may be relatively trivial; if God creates a world that contains 12,141,954 iguanas at a time T, it seems unlikely, as Tom Flint points out, that "dire moral consequences would have resulted had God brought it about that 12,141,955 existed at that time . . ."¹² It seems unlikely, in other words, that exactly one world is the very best world God could create; perhaps there is a set of equally good worlds from which God is free to choose. But if one tries to exploit this qualification in an effort to safeguard divine freedom, if one restricts God's freedom to very trivial choices, one ends up, as Wesley Morriston points out, denying that God is "free when anything morally significant is at stake."¹³ And quite apart from the issue of moral significance, there is this consequence: the more important God's choice is, the less free it is; the less important it is, the more free it is. To restrict God's freedom to trivial choices and to deny that he has any *moral* freedom at all is hardly, it seems to me, a satisfactory view of divine freedom.

A far better strategy, I think, is first to concede that Spinoza's conception of divine freedom is essentially correct, and then to exploit the distinction between created and uncreated persons in an effort to explain why, in the case of created persons, free will and determinism are incompatible. Consider this fundamental assumption of the Free Will Defense: that God has a morally sufficient reason to create a universe in which the highest moral virtues can be cultivated. According to libertarians, moral virtues cannot be imposed upon one person by another and cannot be instilled, produced, or brought about by a sufficient cause external to the agent. The point is once again essentially negative: any disposition to behave

that is produced by an act of creation (i.e., by a sufficient cause external to the created agent), whatever else it may be, is not a moral virtue. Some dispositions, no doubt, are produced in this way, for example the baby's disposition to cry when hungry, but a moral virtue cannot be produced in this way. That point, however, has no relevance in the case of God, since *none* of God's dispositions to behave are imposed upon him by an act of creation; when God acts in a loving way, for instance, that is a true expression of himself as an independent being. It is only in the case of created persons, therefore, that the problem of determinism is even relevant. If God wanted to create persons who are, like himself, both independent and morally virtuous—who are at least sometimes the uncaused cause of morally right actions—he had no choice but to create persons who are free in the libertarian sense. Then, once these created persons are subjected to a process of "soul-making," as John Hick calls it, once they are perfected through a complex process of free choice, failure, correction, and redemption, their perfected nature need not be thought of as something imposed upon them from without. So long as their own free and uncaused choices play *some* role in their own perfection—even if it be nothing more than a simple letting go, a willingness to allow the Spirit of God to do its work—their perfected nature can be thought of as truly their own.

We here touch upon a point that the New Testament presents as a great mystery: the creation of a child of God. According to the New Testament, created persons come into their full inheritance only when they come to participate fully in the divine nature, only when it becomes no more possible for them to will evil than it is for God himself. To penetrate this mystery fully, I suppose, we should have to understand how Jesus could say, "I and my father are one," or how Paul could say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." But this much, it seems to me, is clear: a Christian view of moral perfection requires that we distinguish between a correct and an incorrect claim that libertarians have made. The correct claim is this: No action that can be traced back to a sufficient cause external to the agent is truly free. The incorrect claim is this: An action is free only if it is logically and psychologically possible for the person who performs it to refrain from it. The latter claim seems to me inconsistent not only with Christian theology, but with widespread intuitions about the nature of moral character as well. In a very real sense, the measure of one's moral character—the measure of one's love, for instance—is just the extent to which certain actions are no longer possible. The man who truly loves his wife of thirty years does not simply refrain from subjecting her to severe torture on a given occasion; it is not even possible that he should want to do such a thing. It would be utterly inconsistent with the love that controls him. The trick, of course, is to spell out clearly the nature of the impossibility here, which is, it seems to me, something like this. The disposition to love, like other moral virtues, is

essentially a form of true vision or enlightenment, a way of seeing things as God sees them; it is no more possible for the man who loves his wife to want to torture her than it is for him to believe that she does not exist. In both cases, the man simply sees the truth of the matter; in the former, he sees (correctly) that his own interests and those of his wife do not conflict, that he could not even try to harm his wife without in fact harming himself. But the important point, I repeat, is that such impossibilities are an essential part of moral virtue and in no way detract from one's moral responsibility. Just as the greatest conceivable being is one who (logically) could not choose to act in ways that are malicious and cruel, so the perfected saint is one who (psychologically) could not choose to act in such ways either. And just as the greatest conceivable being nonetheless has the power, I have argued, to act in such ways, so also, I think, does the perfected saint. So here, too, we must distinguish between the "could" of power and the "could" of psychological possibility. One might have the power to do something, even though it is psychologically impossible that one should want to exercise that power.

But none of this counts against the other claim that libertarians have made: that no free action can be traced back to a sufficient cause *external to the agent*. Just as God remains the uncaused cause of events in the world even in those cases where his actions are determined by his own nature (or character), so also do the perfected saints. Perfected saints do differ from God in this respect: their moral character is an *acquired* character and must therefore be *freely* appropriated. Their moral character is no more something distinct from themselves as agents, however, than God's character is something distinct from himself; it simply defines who they are, what kind of person they have become (loving, just, etc.). According to the Christian religion, of course, the process of moral development is exceedingly complex. Though the moral virtues can no doubt be cultivated in a variety of subtle ways, the result is more often than not failure. That is why the New Testament speaks of the need for a transformed heart and insists that we are saved by grace, not by human effort. The point is not that God is able to impose the moral virtues upon us from outside; the point is that moral growth requires an act of submission, the willingness to permit a higher power to work in and through us in order that we might be truly enlightened. It is this essential condition of moral perfection—the act of submission, the letting go—that cannot, in my opinion, be explained in terms of "event-causation"; but whatever my personal beliefs in the matter, anyone who acknowledges that uncaused choices play an essential part in the moral development of created persons will thereby give point to the Free Will Defense. It is the distinction between created and uncreated persons that is important in this context; and as (P₂) demonstrates, this distinction will enable one to combine Spinoza's conception of divine freedom with a basically libertarian conception of human freedom.

v

In this paper, I have argued that both God and the perfected saints remain free with respect to actions that are determined by their own character and nature; I have also argued that this claim is compatible with the Free Will Defense as a solution to the problem of evil. In the preceding section, moreover, I suggested that a Christian view of moral perfection requires us to distinguish between a correct and an incorrect claim that libertarians have made, and I tried there to sketch out, without much attention to detail, a picture of free agency that combines Spinoza's conception of divine freedom with a basically libertarian conception of human freedom. That there are difficulties with the picture I have sketched, I freely acknowledge; that these difficulties cannot be met, I am not yet prepared to concede. In this final section, therefore, I shall address a couple of technical difficulties with the picture I have sketched.

The place to begin, I suppose, is with an intuition that underlies some of the most powerful arguments against compatibilism: the intuition that, if I am powerless to prevent something from happening, then I am also powerless to prevent the inevitable consequences of its happening. Reminiscent of a familiar modal principle—the principle that if p is necessarily true and p entails q , then q is necessarily true—the intuition might be expressed initially as follows:

- (P₃) If p entails q , p is true, and it is not within S's power to bring it about that p is false, then it is not within S's power to bring it about that q is false either.

On the face of it, this principle seems unexceptionable and seems to provide a powerful argument against the theory that free agency and causal determinism are logically compatible. For suppose that the thesis of determinism—the thesis that every event has a sufficient cause—were true. It would then follow that every action I perform is an inevitable consequence of conditions that are both external to myself and beyond my control. According to our ordinary ways of thinking, for instance, conditions that existed in 1500 A.D. are both external to myself and beyond my control; but if determinism were true, then any action I perform today would be an inevitable consequence of conditions that existed in 1500 A.D. Even if some form of backwards causation were possible, moreover—and I am by no means convinced it is not—the remote causes of my present actions could not possibly be under my control now. If only *some* actions of mine—call them D-actions—can be traced back to such remote causes, it might still be possible, perhaps, that the remote causes of these D-actions are still under my control now; for it might still be possible that it is now within my (unexercised) power to perform some other action (some non-D-action) such that, were I to

perform *it*, the remote causes of some D-action would not have existed. But if *every* action of mine can be traced back to such remote causes, then for any action A that I perform, there will be some condition (or set of conditions) over which I have no control that is causally sufficient for A. Now let *q* be a true proposition of the form: *Talbott will do A tomorrow*. If determinism is true, there will be some other proposition *p* that satisfies the antecedent of (P₃): *p* will entail *q*, *p* will be true, and it will not be within my power to bring it about that *p* is false. If we adopt the common sense assumption that causal conditions existing in 1500 A.D. are now beyond my control, *p* might be a conjunctive proposition that describes both the state of the universe in 1500 A.D. and certain laws of nature. But then, if it is not within my power to bring it about that *p* is false and *p* entails *q*, it follows (according to (P₃)) that it is not within my power to bring it about that *q* is false either. If, furthermore, it is not within my power to bring it about that *q* is false, then it is not within my power to refrain from A; and if it is not within my power to refrain from A, then I am not free with respect to A. If determinism is true, therefore, I am not a free agent.

Now I find this argument altogether convincing and must therefore confront a difficulty. As it stands, (P₃) is not only inconsistent with compatibilism: it is inconsistent with my main thesis in this paper as well. I have argued that one must distinguish between two classes of necessarily true propositions: those whose truth in the actual world is not brought about by any agent at all, not even by God, and those whose truth is indeed brought about by God. For lack of better terminology, we might call the former “independent necessary truths” and the latter “dependent necessary truths.” With respect to the latter, I have also argued that God has the (unexercised) power to bring it about that these propositions are false; and that argument is clearly inconsistent with (P₃). For consider once again

$$(4) \quad 2 + 2 = 4$$

and

- (1) There exists a favorable balance of good over evil.

If all necessarily true propositions are logically equivalent and (1) is indeed necessarily true, then (4) entails (1); so if God is powerless to bring it about that (4) is false, as I am assuming, it would follow, given (P₃), that he is also powerless to bring it about that (1) is false. Or consider:

- (10) God exists

and

- (11) God is loving and kind.

One might be inclined to argue that (10) and (11) are not only necessarily true, but *independent* necessary truths; and if they are, then God is powerless to bring it about that these propositions are false. But (10) and (11) each entails that God never performs any action that is malicious and cruel; so it follows, given (P_3), that God is powerless to perform any such action. If (P_3) is acceptable as it stands, therefore, then the main thesis of this paper is false.

But (P_3) should, it seems to me, be restricted in some way. (P_3) certainly seems to hold in the case of contingent propositions; if I am now powerless to bring it about that

(12) Lincoln was assassinated in 1865

is false, then I am also powerless to bring it about that a logical consequence of (12), namely

(13) Lincoln was alive in 1865,

is false. Nor can there be any question about cases where p and q are both independent necessary truths, or even where they are both dependent necessary truths. In the case where p is an independent and q a dependent necessary truth, however, there are, I believe, good reasons for denying that (P_3) is a sound principle; indeed anyone who grants a distinction between these two kinds of necessary truth must be prepared, I think, to modify some plausible sounding principles. Consider this example. If p and q are logically equivalent and God has the power to bring it about that p is true, then he also has the power, one might think, to bring it about that q is true. But that could not possibly be right if there really are the two kinds of necessary truth. (1) and (4) *are*, after all, logically equivalent, but God's power to bring it about that (1) is true, to produce a favorable balance of good over evil in the world, in no way implies the power to bring it about that (4) is true. No one *brings it about* that two plus two equals four. And similarly for (P_3). The question of whether God has the power to bring it about that (1) is false is independent of whether he has the power to bring it about that (4) is false; the two questions are independent for the same reason that whether God brings it about that (1) is true is independent of whether he brings it about that (4) is true. Similarly, if

(10) God exists

and

(11) God is loving and kind

are treated as independent necessary truths, they are no different from

(4) $2 + 2 = 4$

in this regard; God's powers with respect to independent necessary truths are logically independent of his powers with respect to dependent necessary truths. Accordingly, even though (11) entails that God never does anything malicious and cruel, God may nonetheless have the (unexercised) power to perform such acts; and if that sounds paradoxical, the reason may be that one is inclined to ask an improper question at this point, something like: "What if God should actually *do* something malicious and cruel? Would he not then *be* malicious and cruel himself?" But that question *is* improper, given the nature of my thesis. I have argued that even though it is logically impossible that God should exercise his power to do something malicious and cruel, he nonetheless has such power. The assumption that God does exercise such power is therefore necessarily false and thus entails every proposition; it even entails that God is loving and kind! The important point, however, is the one already made: if (10) and (11) are treated as independent necessary truths, then they have no relevance whatsoever to God's powers with respect to dependent necessary truths.

Of course one might adopt, at this point, a view that I find attractive: the view that even though (11) is necessarily true, it is nonetheless God's freely chosen nature to be loving and kind. One might adopt, in other words, the view that (11) is a *dependent* necessary truth. If so, then God does have the (unexercised) power to bring it about that (11) is false. He has the power to perform malicious and cruel acts and therefore has the power to do something such that, were he to do it, he would not be loving and kind at all but malicious and cruel instead. He has this power even though it is logically impossible that he should want to exercise it. And similarly for the perfected saints. Despite their transformed hearts and renewed minds, the perfected saints retain the power (but not the will) to sin. They will always have the power to do something such that, were they to do it, they would not be perfected saints at all but dishonest and unfaithful sinners instead; they will always have such power even when it becomes psychologically impossible that they should want to exercise it. In a word, to have the power to sin is one thing; to be the kind of person who might want to exercise such power is quite another.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power" in Alfred J. Freddoso (ed.) *The Existence and Nature of God* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, p. 87).

2. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (London: Oxford University Press,

1974), pp. 169-184.

3. One might object at this point that, even though God performs actions in the world that determine *how* (1) is true, he does not thereby bring it about *that* (1) is true. But one who raises such an objection owes us some explanation of what this could possibly mean. Suppose that a man, Smith, draws a triangle on a blank page at a time T and thus brings it about that

(A) A plane figure is on the page at T

is true. Because Smith could have rendered (A) true by drawing a square or a rectangle on the page, he has presumably determined *how* (A) is true, that is, *how it comes to be* that (A) is true. But Smith could hardly have determined *how it comes to be* that (A) is true without, at the same time, bringing it about *that* (A) is true. Of course there are many differences between (1) and (A), not the least of which is that (1), unlike (A), is necessarily true. But though (1) is indeed necessarily true, there is no world in which something other than God's decisions determine *how* (1) is true. And that point seems to me decisive. If (i) a proposition *p* were true in all possible worlds, and (ii) in some of these worlds God's decisions were not responsible for *how p* is true, but (iii) in the actual world God's decisions *were* responsible for *how p* is true, then one might be tempted to say something like this: "*That p* is true is independent of what decisions God makes in the actual world concerning *how p* is true," or "Like $2 + 2 = 4$ *p* would have been true regardless of what decisions God had made; so even if in the actual world God determines *how p* is true, he does not bring it about *that p* is true." In the case of (1), moreover, God is prepared (given our assumptions about his nature) to do whatever is necessary to guarantee that (1) is true; that these requirements are different in different possible worlds hardly entitles us to deny that it is God who guarantees, who actually brings it about, *that* (1) is true. (See also note 4.)

4. The argument of this paragraph is intended to counter the following kind of view. One might hold that God has the power to bring it about that (1) is true only in this sense: "he has the power to bring about the contingent arrangements of things which constitute the truth conditions of (1) in the actual world." Where C is the proposition that specifies these contingent arrangements, God brings it about that (1) is true, in other words, only in the sense that he brings it about that C is true. If God *freely* brings it about that C is true, therefore, it follows, one might argue, only that God has the power to bring it about that C is false; it does not follow that he also has the power to bring it about that (1) is false. A similar point could be made concerning (6) above. If Smith *freely* brings it about that (6) is true and does so by flinging a rock through the window, it follows only that Smith has the power to refrain from flinging the rock through the window; it does not follow that he has the power to bring it about that (6) is false. (I am indebted to an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy* for a clear statement of the view described above. The quotation is from the referee's report.)

I think it important to observe carefully, however, the implications of (P₁) for each of these cases: the one where God brings it about that (1) is true and the one where Smith brings it about that (6) is true. Take the latter case first. If Smith brings it about that (6) is true and does so by flinging a rock through the window in question, it follows, given (P₁), only that in some possible world *someone*—God, for example—has the power to bring it about that (6) is false. And that is just what one would expect. If there are a variety of different ways in which *someone or other* could bring it about that (6) is true, then it must be at least *possible*, one would think, that someone has the power to bring it about that (6) is false. And similarly for the former case. If God brings it about that (1) is true and does so by bringing it about the C is true, it follows, given (P₁), that in some possible world someone has the power to bring it about that (1) is false. In this case, however, no one other than God is even a plausible candidate for the possession of such power, and there seems to be no

reason to believe that God has such power in some worlds but not in others; so *in this particular case*, it follows, given (P₁), that *God* has the power to bring it about that (1) is true only if *God* has the power to bring it about that (1) is false.

A related point is this. There are no doubt many possible worlds in which (6) is true and someone other than Smith brings it about that (6) is true, but there are none in which (1) is true and someone other than God brings it about that (1) is true. In every world, that is, it is God who guarantees that truth of (1); it is hardly surprising, therefore, that *someone* has the power to bring it about that (1) is false only if *God* has such power.

5. Here I assume that any world which has the same history as the actual world (up to the present moment) is one in which God has indeed promised never again to destroy the earth with a flood. That assumption could be challenged and has been challenged in an ingenious way by Flint and Freddoso *op. cit.*; and the view of Flint and Freddoso is, it seems to me, essentially correct. I see no reason, moreover, to deny the possibility that someone *now* has the power to do something such that, were it done, God would not have made the promise in question. For present purposes, however, I am assuming that no such power is possible. My point is that, *even if* no such power is possible, God still has the (unexercised) power to break his promise.

6. When I speak of the created nature of created persons, I do not, of course, mean *essence* in the philosophical sense: a set of essential properties. I mean rather created character traits, dispositions, temperament, etc.; in this sense one can speak very naturally of one's human nature, one's sinful nature, one's redeemed nature, etc.

7. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Prop. XXIX.

8. *Ibid.*, Def. VII.

9. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1944), p. 23.

10. For the distinction between strong and weak actualization, see Plantinga *op. cit.*, pp. 169-174.

11. One well-known implication of Plantinga's Free Will Defense is, of course, that the best world God can actualize and the best of all possible worlds may be quite different. But if it's so much as possible that these are different, then there is indeed more than one possible world; and this remains true even on the assumption that all of *God's* choices are determined by essential elements in his nature.

12. Tom Flint, "The Problem of Divine Freedom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983), p. 261.

13. Wesley Morriston, "Is God 'Significantly Fee'?" *Faith and Philosophy*, July, 1985, p. 259.

14. For helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, I am indebted to William P. Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Philip Quinn, and an anonymous referee for *Faith and Philosophy*.