

Determinism in Philosophy and in Theology

By Arthur N. Prior¹

In modern discussions of determinism and freewill it is commonly assumed that, if the controversy has any bearing at all on the question of the truth or falsehood of religion, the determinists are on the irreligious side, and the advocates of freewill on the religious. It is exceedingly rare for philosophers to pay any great attention to the fact a whole line of Christian thinkers, running from Augustine (to trace it back no further) through Luther and Calvin and Pascal to Barth and Brunner in our own day, have attacked freewill in the name of religion. Hastings Rashdall,² indeed, was at the same time a determinist and a religious believer; but his determinism was something not incompatible with his religion rather than a central part of it – he did not attack freewill in the spirit of the Augustinian tradition, as a grave peril to religious faith. Jonathan Edwards,³ the 18th – century New England divine who produced a novel defence of Calvinism by not appealing to the omnipotence and omniscience of God but simply demonstrating the absurdity of freewill itself, usually finds a place in histories of philosophy; but Edwards does no more than Rashdall to bring the specifically religious arguments against freewill before the notice of philosophers – on the contrary, his importance consists precisely in having brought the “philosophical” arguments against freewill before the notice of religious believers. As far as his philosophical audience is concerned (if he has one), his work can only confirm its assumption that Augustinianism (or Calvinism, or Jansenism, whatever we choose to call it) is nothing more than ordinary determinism expressed in rather crude and primitive terms and therefore merits no special attention from philosophers.

In fact, however Augustinians have almost always insisted on distinguishing their own position sharply from that of other determinists. Augustine and Calvin both vehemently repudiated any connection between their views and the fatalism of the Stoics; Pascal⁴ condemns Calvinism because he imagined that it failed to carry through this distinction completely and consistently; when Hobbes⁵ appeared on the scene, he was not welcomed but violently attacked by the majority of Calvinists and Augustinians; and the attempt of Edwards⁶ to make Calvinism intellectually

¹ Edited by David Jakobsen. The article is in the Prior archive at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 6. The article is difficult to date. Hasle suggests 1944. (See <http://www.prior.aau.dk/Boxes/Box+1+--+11/Box+6/Determinism+in+Philosophy+and+Theology>). This article, as Hasle rightly notes, provides a reason to think that Priors crisis of faith passed away shortly after 1942. On the other hand, this should be seen in light of Prior’s vision in the midst of his crisis of faith, which was to go on with historical investigations of the reformed faith, even though he considered theology to be an illusion.

² Hastings Rashdall (1858 – 1924). English philosopher, theologian, and historian – in particular known for his “The Theory of Good and Evil: A Treatise on Moral Philosophy” (1907).

³ Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758) American Philosophical theologian. Edward’s influence on Prior has been tremendous and he figures in many of his writings.

⁴ Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662)

⁵ Thomas Hoppes (1558- 1679)

⁶ Prior is most likely referring to Edwards *Notes on The Mind* (1723), which can be seen as an attempt to relate John Locke’s view on the mind to religious experience. According to Wainwright “Locke’s influence on his epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophical psychology was

respectable by associating it with a psychology akin to that of Hobbes and Locke met with a very mixed reception from his co-religionists.

“Necessitarians” appeared in the Calvinist rank in the 18th century; some as followers of Edwards and some independently, but they were never unopposed. In our own day Barth and Brunner, while reviving “Calvinism” of a sort, make it even clearer than former exponents of that creed have done, that what they are expounding is not pure determinism but a quite paradoxical mixture of determinism and freewill.

What is it which marks off this “religious” determinism from other forms of the doctrine? Barth, in his Gifford lectures “The Knowledge of God and the Service of God”,⁷ states that what is at stake in the religious doctrine of predestination is neither “the secular mystery of determinism” nor “the equally secular mystery of indeterminism”, but “the holy and real mystery of Jesus Christ”. This “mystery of Jesus Christ” is, of course, the “mystery” of the “redemption” of men hopelessly enslaved by “sin”. It is in its close association with the concepts of “original sin” and “redemption” that the religious doctrine of predestination differs from philosophical or scientific determinism. Pascal, in his “Essay on Grace”, charges Calvinists with holding that God created some men as “saved” men and others as “damned”, but the true Augustinian doctrine, he says, is that God created Adam, and all mankind “in” Adam, both free and innocent, but Adam’s sin left himself and all mankind enslaved and unable to redeem themselves. Viewing mankind in this state, God decreed to save some through the gift of faith in Christ, and to leave the rest to perish as they deserved. There is a misrepresentation here of Calvin’s own teaching, though perhaps not of that of his successor Beza; Calvin was a “true Augustinian” by Pascal’s standards, holding the same view of the matter as Pascal himself. To a detached outsider, however, it is difficult to see that these differences matter so much as Calvinists and Jansenists thought. For even in “true Augustinianism” the wills of men as we know them are completely determined, at least as far as their direction to salvation or damnation is concerned; and God’s behaviour in condemning men for what they cannot help doing and being seems as difficult to justify as it would be if He had directly created men evil. The theory that all men were free “in Adam” before the fall is simply incomprehensible.

The most paradoxical features of the earlier Augustinianism are simply given sharper emphasis by Barth and Brunner. That God selects some men for salvation and others for damnation is no longer mentioned. It is insisted, however, that “in ourselves” we are unable to perform any actions which are not at least tainted with “sin”, while at the same time we are responsible for this taint, and guilty of it. From this helplessness we may emerge only by an act of faith which it is not in our own power to perform, but which, when “by the grace of God” we do perform it, is an act of real freedom; then, indeed, we have “free will” for the first time. We are guilty of that which we are totally helpless to alter; and to God alone belongs the glory of what we do when we are truly free.

Absurd as these doctrines appear, they are in the end no more so than, the ordinary non-Augustinian concept of “moral accountability”, which C.D. Broad has shown, in his lecture on

profound.”

Wainwright, William, "Jonathan Edwards", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/edwards/>.

⁷ Karl Barth held the Gifford Lectures in 1937-1938. Prior has written about the Lectures in *Faith, Unbelief and Evil* (also available as part of Prior’s Nachlass).

“Determinism, Indeterminism and Libertarianism”⁸, to involve contradictory presuppositions, (being unsatisfied both by the view that our choices are strictly determined by previous events and by the view that they are inexplicable accidents, between which no “tertium quid” is conceivable). They are doctrines, moreover, which for centuries have exerted considerable influence both on ordinary people and on men of considerable intellect and philosophical acumen. Blaise Pascal was neither a fool nor a sophist. Even those of us who accept a straightforward determinism have to give some account of men’s feeling of freedom, and their feeling of guilt; and it is a least conceivable that the “absurdities” of Augustinianism contain a more accurate psychological description of the state of mind concerned, than does the “absurdity” of the ordinary non-Augustinian concept of “moral accountability”. If the concepts of guilt and retributive justice are in any case irrational, we need not be put off by the apparent “injustice” of the Augustinian deity, and can observe dispassionately the correspondence between the Augustinian system and men’s actual feelings about freedom and responsibility, and its consequent appeal to the mind.

Over large stretches of ordinary life, it doesn’t seem to matter very much whether we regard our choices as rigidly determined or as free. Whatever lies behind them, they remain genuine “choices” and genuine “acts”, and that is all that concerns us. At some moments this complete indifference to the nature of their origination may even be felt with a positive thrill of pleasure. At times of intense and unhampered activity, we feel that we are originating our own acts without either compulsion or opposition, and at the same time that we are being borne along without needing to make any effort. To speak deterministically, we cannot say at such times whether our role in the chain of causations is that of cause or effect. The part of the causal stream which flows in us, or rather, the part of it which we are, is flowing in an unimpeded and unbroken way, and the division of the process into “causes” and “effects” is irrelevant. Experiences of this kind, to which no one is a stranger (they may come, for instance, to a sportsman in the heat of a game, or to a writer during his composition), seem to make sense of at least one part the Augustinian picture – that which depicts our only acts of real freedom as acts which have their source not in ourselves at all but in “divine grace”.

These are times when we are not interested in the determinism-freewill issue, and when it simply has no emotional meaning. The issue only becomes a burning one in periods of inner conflict. When we perform actions of which we “disapprove”, and especially ones which we “disapprove” intensely, the emotional oscillation between determinism and freewill begins. We attempt on the one hand to convince ourselves that we need not have acted as we did; at the very moment of action our “conscience” dissociated itself from the act and condemned us. At the same time, reflection on the lapse occasions a feeling of helplessness – the thing was so unpleasant or humiliating that we couldn’t have done it had we really “been ourselves”; we were carried away by a force we could not resist. This sense of helplessness is strengthened if an act has been repeated after a firm resolve never to do it again; though the sense of guilt and responsibility is increased at the same time. This state of conflict between two parts of the self, in which we feel both responsible and enslaved, is also one to which no one can be a stranger; and it is one which the more sombre

⁸ Broad 1934.

part of the Augustinian theory seem to describe far more accurately than the unambiguous moralism of the pure libertarian.

Both the feeling of responsibility and the feeling of helplessness, we may note, contain within them the possibility of future healing. The feeling of helplessness reveals to us that there are determining forces behind our “choices” which we need to discover and control. On ordinary occasions the fact that our choices are pre-determined does not concern us; we can and do forget about it, and do not waste overmuch time examining the motives and causes of our actions, but in these situations of conflict it becomes important to know that we are thus determined and to discover the determining factors and forces. The feeling of helplessness itself helps us by making determinism emotionally real to us. At the same time the feeling of responsibility, while arousing considerable present pain in the form of remorse reveals to us that it is in our power to find out what the forces are which determine our choices, and even to exercise some control over them (while, of course, being in this very exercise “controlled” by other forces which do not worry us). Usually, however, we need outside help to achieve this release. All these facts are brought out by the Augustinian picture of man’s slavery and redemption.

What religious determinism describes is thus not the universal chain of cause and effect, or the universal reign of natural law, but particular inward compulsions and dependences – obsessions and inhibitions before which we are helpless, and our dependence on outside help for release from them through analysis. St. Paul’s doctrine of sin and salvation, which underlies the doctrine of Augustine and his followers, is treated by Freud, in “Moses and Monotheism”⁹, as a partial psychoanalysis, and consequent partial release, of men suffering from the guilt of parricide and parricidal impulses. We might say that the Old Testament, together with the Gospel narratives, forms a book of case-histories, or one large case-history, the analysis of which is given in Paul’s Epistles. The probable truth of some view of this general type, is strongly indicated by the resemblance between the Augustinian framework of thought about compulsion and freedom, and the psychoanalyst’s general description of neurotic states and their removal. The theological doctrine of predestination is a “Theory of Obsessions” prefaced to the analysis of a particular case.

⁹ Cf. (Freud 1939).