

## Theological Determinism and God's Standing to Blame

I argue that God lacks the standing to blame or punish people for their sin if theological determinism is true, and that this is so even if sinners deserve both blame and punishment for sins God determines them to commit (and thus even if theological determinism is compatible with human free will and moral responsibility). I then respond to two recent objections to this conclusion, one by John Ross Churchill, the other by Patrick Todd. I conclude by noting several implications of the position here defended.

### 1. Introduction

Just because a person deserves blame or punishment doesn't mean we are entitled to blame or punish the person. This is easiest to see in the case of punishment. A criminal might deserve punishment for her crimes, but, outside a Lockean state of nature, private citizens haven't the right to punish the criminal. Similarly, a child might deserve punishment for her bad behavior, but if you aren't the child's parent, guardian, teacher, or other suitably situated authority figure, it probably isn't your place to punish her. There are fewer restrictions on who is entitled to blame the blameworthy. Still, a person's blameworthiness doesn't automatically license others to blame the person. Hypocritical blaming is often said to illustrate the point. Someone who has just lied to gain an unfair advantage is hardly in a position to blame others for doing the same thing.<sup>1</sup>

In situations like the ones just described, there is a clear sense in which a person isn't morally authorized to blame or punish an offender who may nevertheless deserve to be blamed

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<sup>1</sup> I should note that by 'blame' I mean something more than just moral criticism. The sort of blame at issue is essentially tied to negative reactive attitudes like resentment, moral anger, and indignation.

or punished. Consequently, it would be morally inappropriate for the person to blame or punish the offender even if the offender deserves it. Philosophers have come to describe these sorts of situations by saying that the person lacks the *standing* to blame or punish the offender.<sup>2</sup>

Many religious traditions assume that God has the standing to both blame and punish sinners for their sin. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scriptures are replete with warnings about God's wrath and divine punishment for sin, and it is assumed, given that God is never guilty of doing anything morally untoward, that God's wrath towards and punishment of sinners is perfectly just and appropriate.<sup>3</sup> My aim in what follows is to show that this assumption about God's standing is at odds with views of divine providence that embrace theological determinism.

Theological determinism is the thesis that everything that happens—the good, the bad, and the ugly—ultimately does so because God, in his infinite wisdom, determines it to happen. It entails, as John Ross Churchill recently put it, that “*for any human action,*” including any sinful human action, “*the ultimate explanation as to why the person acted as he did rather than acting otherwise (or refraining from acting) is that God determined that he would so act.*”<sup>4</sup> This, of course, is compatible with their being non-ultimate explanations of human behavior (e.g., in the form of intermediary causes). But if theological determinism is true, then the ultimate or final explanation of why humans behave as we do rather than in some other way is found in something external to us and beyond our control, namely, the immutable will of the Almighty.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the recent literature on this subject, see Coates and Tognazzini, “Blame,” section 2.3.1.

<sup>3</sup> As the Psalmist tells us, “God is a *righteous* judge, and a God who has indignation everyday” (Psalm 7:11; emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> Churchill, “Determinism and Divine Blame,” 428 (italics original).

There is a longstanding debate about whether theological determinism is compatible with creaturely free will and moral responsibility. I'm among those who think it isn't, and, as I'll explain momentarily, it's a short step from this incompatibilist position to the conclusion that God lacks the standing to blame or punish people for their sin if theological determinism is true. However, I won't rest my case for that conclusion on the incompatibilist premise. I'll argue that God lacks the standing to blame or punish people for their sin if theological determinism is true, and that this is so even if sinners deserve both blame and punishment for sin God determines them to commit, and thus even if theological determinism is compatible with creaturely freedom and responsibility. After arguing for this conclusion, I'll respond to two recent objections to it, one by Churchill, the other by Patrick Todd. Next, I'll briefly explain why my argument can't be extended to typical indeterministic theories of divine providence like Molinism or open theism. I conclude by noting several important implications of the position here defended.

## 2. A No Relevant Difference Argument

I begin by noting that the central claim for which I'll be arguing—that God isn't entitled to blame or punish sinners for sin he determines them to commit—is far from implausible. Indeed, even those who ultimately reject it often concede its initial appeal. Churchill, for example, observes that, according to many versions of theological determinism,

wrongdoers are taken to be worthy of blame, and God is counted among those who are entitled to blame them. But it is hard *prima facie* to see how theological determinists can coherently maintain both [theological determinism and God's standing to blame]. For it is not at all obvious how it can be appropriate for God to blame someone for wrongdoing

that was due ultimately and specifically to divine determination. If...God determined Peter to act exactly as he did rather than otherwise...it is puzzling, to say the least, how it can be appropriate for God to blame Peter for that very action.<sup>5</sup>

Later, as I mentioned, I'll consider two attempts, including one by Churchill, to resolve this puzzle. But first I make a case for thinking that the puzzle is irresolvable (i.e., that we can't correctly maintain both theological determinism and God's standing to blame and punish).

Theological determinism comes in two main varieties: hard and soft. Hard theological determinism combines theological determinism with incompatibilism (the thesis that [theological] determinism is incompatible with human free will and moral responsibility). Soft theological determinism combines theological determinism with the thesis that human creatures have free will and are sometimes morally responsible for their behavior. This conjunction entails that theological determinism is compatible with human free will and moral responsibility.

Hard theological determinism is clearly at odds with God's standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin. For it entails that sinners aren't to blame for their sin and thus don't deserve punishment for it, a fact about which God, being essentially omniscient, would be well aware. But no one has the standing to blame or punish those one knows to be blameless. Hence, God lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners for their sin if hard theological determinism is true.

Matters are less straightforward on soft theological determinism. Nevertheless, I'll argue that soft theological determinism too is at odds with God's standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin. The following example is central to my argument for that claim.

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<sup>5</sup> Churchill, "Determinism and Divine Blame," 430-431.

*Mob Hit:* The mob has kidnapped Jen's kids and is threatening to harm them unless Jen complies with the mob's demands. Moreover, Jen has no way of rescuing her children except to comply with these demands. What the mob is demanding is that Jen somehow get someone to angrily hit her in the face but without telling the person about the mob or the predicament they've placed Jen in. Luckily for Jen, who is a practicing psychologist, she knows that one of her patients, George, is especially sensitive about his appearance, and that if she were to repeatedly insult his appearance in just the right way, for just the right amount of time, he might very well fly off the handle and hit Jen in the face. So, at their next appointment, Jen repeatedly insults George's appearance in a way designed to trigger his sensitivity, standing right in his face so that he can easily reach out and hit her, all in an effort to get him to angrily hit her. Much to Jen's relief, her plan works just as she hoped it would. In response to Jen's repeated insults, George flies off the handle and slaps her in the face. (Bear in mind that George is an otherwise kind and peace-loving guy who has never assaulted anyone ever, and he would never have assaulted Jen had she not insulted his appearance in precisely the way she did.) The mob, happy that Jen complied with their demands, returns her children to her unharmed.

Cases like this form the basis of a no-relevant difference argument for the conclusion that God lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners if (soft) theological determinism is true.

The argument, in brief, is this. Jen lacks the standing to blame or prosecute George for hitting her, even if he deserves both blame and punishment for doing so. But there is no relevant difference between Jen in this respect and God given theological determinism. So, God doesn't

have the standing to blame or punish sinners if theological determinism is true, even if they deserve blame and punishment for their sin. I defend both premises of this argument in turn.

### 3. The No Standing Premise

Consider, first, the claim that Jen lacks the standing to blame or prosecute George for what he did even if he's blameworthy for doing it. I'll start by motivating this claim at an intuitive level. Having done so, I'll then show that there is also a good theoretical reason to think it's true.

To see the claim's intuitive appeal, imagine the story plays out as follows. Jen films the session with George (as proof for the mob) and, after dressing him down for hitting her, she sends the footage to the police and files assault charges against him, prosecuting him to the fullest extent of the law. Jen, it seems to me, behaves very badly in doing so. Doesn't it seem that way to you? After all, she exploited George's moral weaknesses to achieve her purposes, weaknesses to which she was uniquely privy. She wanted George to fail morally, set him up to fail, and did everything in her power to ensure that he did fail. These facts seem to undercut the moral authority she would otherwise have to blame or prosecute George for his bad behavior, and this is true even if George deserves some blame and punishment for that behavior.

In support of this last claim, note that there isn't anything in the story that rules out the possibility that George *deserves* both blame and punishment for his offense. We can imagine that George is a morally competent individual who believes that assaulting those who insult you is never the right response. We can also assume (to satisfy those like me with incompatibilist sensibilities) that while Jen's manipulation of George certainly influenced his behavior and is an important part of why George behaved as he did, her actions didn't causally determine him to do what he did or in any other way eliminate his free agency. George, we may assume, could have

done otherwise, but he let his temper get the better of him and freely hit Jen, despite believing that doing so was the morally wrong response to her insults. Given these assumptions, George surely deserves some blame for hitting Jen (even if only a little bit), and, assuming that people can deserve punishment for their blameworthy behavior, I see no reason why George wouldn't deserve some for his. Even so, it seems that Jen isn't in a position to blame or punish George for his offense given the role she played in bringing it about that he committed the offense.

Thus, insofar as we are inclined to say that Jen lacks the standing to blame or punish George, our intuitions about the matter don't appear to be driven by incompatibilist inclinations or by the thought that George is off the hook. If they were, we would expect our sense that Jen lacks the standing to blame or sanction George to dissipate once it's been made clear that his bad behavior wasn't determined and that he's partly responsible for it. But it doesn't, not entirely anyway. It still seems (to many of us at least) that Jen lacks the standing to blame George for what he did, given the role she played in bringing about his bad behavior, even after we have acknowledged that the behavior wasn't determined and that he's at least partly to blame for it.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps, though, it only seems that way because we are conflating the claim that Jen isn't entitled to blame or punish George with the closely related claim that it would be wrong for her to do so. Although it's easy to conflate these two claims, they are distinct. There are many reasons why it might be wrong to blame or punish someone who deserves it other than a lack of standing (e.g., blaming the person might do a lot more harm than good). In light of this, it could be argued that while it would indeed be wrong for Jen to immediately blame George and file assault charges against him, this isn't because she lacks the standing to do these things. Instead, it's because she has more pressing matters to attend to, namely, doing what needs to be done to

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<sup>6</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to address this possibility.

rescue her children. Jen, one might think, should be focused on getting her children back safely, not on giving George his just deserts. Perhaps, then, it's that fact, not a lack of moral standing, that explains why it would be wrong for Jen to blame and prosecute George.<sup>7</sup>

No doubt Jen's primary concern in the immediate aftermath of George's violent outburst should be getting her children back safely. However, that doesn't explain why it would be wrong for her to blame and prosecute George for what he did. At most it explains why it would be wrong for her to do so immediately. Notice, though, that Jen needn't blame or prosecute George right away. She might do these things later, after she has seen to the safety and wellbeing of her children. But it still seems that Jen would be behaving badly were she to blame or prosecute George, and it seems that way precisely because she exploited his moral weakness for her ends.

Perhaps, though, you just don't share these intuitions about the case. Many people I've talked to do, but I know not everyone will. Fortunately, we needn't rely solely on our intuitions about the matter, for there is a good theoretical reason to think that Jen lacks the standing to blame or punish George, one which, as we'll see, suggests that God too lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners for their sin if theological determinism is true.

Why might Jen lack the standing to blame and punish George? Matt King, in the course of discussing a structurally very similar case, suggests that "it plausibly has something to do with the fact that [she] knowingly placed [George] in a position to fail."<sup>8</sup> She is, as King puts it, "implicated" in George's behavior in a way that undercuts her standing to blame him. There are, King concedes, ways of being implicated in another person's bad behavior that don't undercut one's standing to blame the person for that behavior. He further concedes that he "cannot... give

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this objection.

<sup>8</sup> King, "Manipulation Arguments and the Moral Standing to Blame," 6.



a full accounting of what sorts of implication are required to undermine one's standing to blame." However, he claims that doing so isn't necessary "to make plausible that [in cases like *Mob Hit*] it is the potential blamer's implication that compromises their standing to blame."<sup>9</sup>

I agree with King's basic analysis of why Jen lacks the standing to blame and punish George. She set George up for moral failure. It was part of her plan for him to fail morally in just the way he did, and she did everything in her power to execute that part of her plan. These facts, it seems, are sufficient to "compromise," as King puts it, her standing to blame him for what he did. However, I think we can say a bit more about why, given Jen's involvement in bringing about George's bad behavior, it would be inappropriate for her to blame or prosecute him for it. That is, I think we can say more about what exactly is untoward about Jen blaming and punishing George given the role she plays in bringing about his bad behavior.

Consider the following conversation between Jen and George after George learns the truth about what Jen was up to on that fateful day:

Jen (with obvious resentment in her voice): "How dare you hit me?"

George: "Me? How dare you insult me! You were supposed to be helping me, but instead you repeatedly ridiculed and insulted me!"

Jen (with increasing indignation): "That's no excuse for hitting me. You shouldn't hit people just because they insult you or make fun of you."

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<sup>9</sup> King, "Manipulation Arguments and the Moral Standing to Blame," 8. For a similar suggestion, see McKenna, "Resisting Todd's Moral-Standing Zygote Argument."

George: “Maybe not, but who are you to tell me I shouldn’t have hit you or to blame me for doing so when you wanted me to hit you and did everything you could to bring it about that I hit you? You can’t in good faith both intentionally promote my bad behavior and then subsequently condemn me for it!

George has a point, one that’s supported by reflection on the nature of blame and punishment.

Start with blame. Any acceptable theory of blame will capture blame’s condemnatory element. Whatever else blame is or may involve, it’s clearly an expressive response to (perceived) wrongdoing, and one of the things it expresses is opposition to and condemnation of the relevant behavior. To blame someone for their bad behavior is a way of standing up for the values that were transgressed and of condemning the behavior and censuring the person for it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> A number of recent authors link blame with protest, condemnation, or disapproval of the offender’s bad behavior. See, e.g., Bennett, “The Expressive Function of Blame”; Franklin, “Valuing Blame”; McGreer “Civilizing Blame”; McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*; Smith, “Moral Blame and Moral Protest”; and Talbert “Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest,” among others. To be clear, I’m not endorsing any of their accounts in particular. My claim is simply that, whatever else blame involves, it’s a way of opposing or standing against a person’s bad behavior by condemning the behavior and censuring the person for it. This is true, I contend, even in the case of unexpressed blame. It’s sometimes said that blame can’t essentially be a form of protest since protest is always expressed whereas blame isn’t. But even if that’s true, and even if it undermines the claim that blame is essentially a form of protest, it wouldn’t undermine the claim being made here; for even when we blame others inwardly, without outwardly expressing it, we are still thereby internally standing against or opposing the person’s bad behavior even if our opposition doesn’t count as a form of protest because it is unexpressed.

Something similar is true of punishment. It has long been recognized that punishment has an expressive dimension and that, like blame, one of the things it expresses is opposition to and condemnation of the relevant behavior.<sup>11</sup> As Stephen P. Garvey notes, both “Crime and punishment are expressive...Crime speaks the language of dishonor and disrespect,” whereas “punishment speaks the language of condemnation, censure, and vindication.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, by blaming or punishing a person for something she did or failed to do, we are expressing condemnation of her bad behavior (even if only to ourselves) and, in that way, opposing, standing against, perhaps even protesting what was done. But we can’t in good faith stand against someone’s bad behavior in these ways if we wanted the person to engage in that behavior and deliberately sought to bring it about that they did. To do so would be disingenuous in the extreme. By blaming or sanctioning the person we are saying, in effect, “I oppose your behavior, I stand against it.” But we can’t honestly say that if we wanted the person to do what she did (all things considered) and intentionally helped bring it about that she did it.

This is arguably why (or is part of the reason why) it’s inappropriate for Jen to blame and prosecute George for hitting her. It’s done in bad faith. It communicates that she opposes George’s behavior when, in fact, she promoted it by doing everything she could to bring it about that George engaged in that behavior. True, Jen may condemn the general sort of behavior George engaged in, but she doesn’t oppose George’s particular act of violence, not all things

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<sup>11</sup> Feinberg, “The Expressive Function of Punishment” revived interest in the expressive element of punishment, though, as Garvey points out in “Punishment as Atonement,” the idea that punishment is expressive is much older. See Garvey, “Punishment as Atonement,” 1819-1827 for a good overview of the literature on this topic, including important historical sources. See especially notes 81-87.

<sup>12</sup> Garvey, “Punishment as Atonement,” 1819-1820.

considered anyway. On the contrary, she preferred (all things considered) that George do just what he did, and for the reasons he did, and she did everything she could to see to it that her preference in this matter was satisfied. In short, she fully promoted George's bad behavior. Because of this, she can't in good faith then stand against that behavior by blaming and prosecuting George for it, as doing so would send the false message that she opposes his act.

Being entitled to blame or punish someone for their bad behavior requires being able to do so in good faith, which in turn requires being able to honestly and consistently express the condemnatory message inherent in those activities. It's this requirement, I contend, that Jen fails to satisfy in *Mob Hit*. Although she endorses the value of peaceful conflict resolution, she can't honestly or consistently express the message of opposition to and condemnation of George's act of violence that she would be expressing by blaming or prosecuting him for that act, since she doesn't actually oppose or condemn it (as evidenced by the fact that she preferred George to behave as he did and did everything in her power to bring it about that he behaved that way). She therefore can't in good faith blame or punish George for what he did, which is why she isn't entitled to do so, even if blame and punishment are exactly what he deserves.

#### 4. The No Relevant Difference Premise

Suppose you agree with me that Jen lacks the standing to blame or punish George for losing his temper and hitting her. Then I think you should also agree that God lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners for their sin if theological determinism is true, for, as I'll now argue, there is no relevant difference between the two situations. In support of this no-relevant-difference claim, I'll highlight several key similarities between Jen in *Mob Hit* and God as portrayed by typical

versions of theological determinism. I'll then consider what seems to me the most forceful objection to the no-relevant-difference claim and I'll respond to that objection.

Note, first, that, in getting George to hit her, Jen herself doesn't assault anyone. Although she is instrumental in getting George to assault her, Jen herself isn't guilty of assault. Only George is. In a similar way, God, according to standard versions of theological determinism, is instrumental in bringing it about that people sin but isn't himself guilty of wrongdoing.

Note, too, that Jen needn't approve of assault. We can stipulate that, in general, she disapproves of assault and is committed to peaceful conflict resolution. It's just that, in the present case, she sees George's particular act of hitting her as a necessary evil, necessary, that is, to achieve her good purposes. In this respect, too, she is like God on standard versions of theological determinism. God, says the typical theological determinist, doesn't approve of sinful behavior. He does, however, see specific sinful actions and omissions—namely, those he determines people to commit—as necessary evils for achieving his good purposes.

Speaking of good purposes, note, finally, that Jen, by getting George to hit her, was ultimately aiming at something good (viz., the safety and well-being of her children) and was arguably justified in doing what she did (assuming there was no other way for her to achieve her good purposes). In this respect, too, Jen is similar to God on theological determinism. For God, being morally perfect, wouldn't determine us to sin unless doing so were necessary to achieve his divine purposes. So, if God determines us to sin, God presumably does so because our sin

somehow contributes to a greater good, a good God couldn't realize or achieve in the absence of our sinful behavior, the achievement of which justifies his determining us to sin.<sup>13</sup>

God, then, seems to be in a similar situation to Jen if theological determinism is true. If God blames us (e.g., by expressing divine wrath towards us) for our sin and punishes us for it, God thereby expresses his opposition to our sinful behavior. Yet, if theological determinism is true, God has intentionally seen to it that we engage in that very behavior rather than some other type of behavior (or no behavior at all). God thus seems to support the specific behavior in question, not as an end in itself presumably, but as a means to some further providential outcome. But, again, one can't in good faith both actively promote a certain state or event, even as a means to an end, and yet oppose that same state or event, which is at least part of the reason why it would be inappropriate for God to blame sinners for sin he determines them to commit. The sort of opposition implicit in blame and sanctions would be disingenuous or inconsistent given that God has intentionally determined the specific behavior for which he blames sinners.

At this point, the following objection is likely to occur to some. Jen induces George's bad behavior as a means to her end, but the same, it could be argued, can't be said of God and human sin. God, it might be said, doesn't determine people to commit specific sins as a means to achieving some divine aim. Rather, specific human sins are merely foreseen but unintended side effects of God's providential activity. If so, then we have a difference between Jen and God, one that's arguably relevant to the standing to blame and punish.

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<sup>13</sup> It may also be worth pointing out that George's sin, in *Mob Hit*, is against Jen, the person who initiated his bad behavior. In this respect, too, the case may resemble the case of God and sinners on soft theological determinism. For it's often said that all sin, even sin against other creatures, is ultimately sin against God (see, e.g., Psalm 51:5).

To see its relevance, consider an example. Suppose I justifiably make my children attend a family function that they really don't want to attend. I do so knowing that, as a result of my actions, my children are likely to behave rather badly (e.g., by pouting, behaving rudely to others, etc.). In this case, it seems entirely appropriate for me to blame and perhaps even punish my children in the event that they do behave badly, even though I was instrumental in bringing it about that they behaved that way. Note, though, that their bad behavior wasn't a part of my plan. It was merely a foreseen but undesired and unintended side effect of my otherwise justifiable parental activity. Though I may have causally contributed to my children's bad behavior, I didn't do so in a way that makes it inappropriate for me to blame or punish them for that behavior.

The same, it could be argued, is true of God given theological determinism. God, in seeking to secure certain providential goals, acts in ways that he knows will inevitably result in specific human sins. Even so, it's entirely appropriate for God to blame and punish sinners for those sins, as their sins are a foreseen but undesired and unintended side effects of God's justified providential activity. Thus, while God determines people to commit specific sins, he doesn't do so in a way that undermines his standing to blame or punish people for those sins.

Here's why I think this objection is unsuccessful. When I make my children attend the family function, I have little say about how they respond. But if I could somehow ensure that they respond well, I almost certainly would, especially if I could do so without abrogating or otherwise undercutting their agency. God, however, isn't limited in the ways I am; God could ensure that his creatures never sin. What's more, assuming the compatibility of human free will and divine determinism (an assumption no soft theological determinist is in a position dispute), God could do so without abrogating our free will. So, why doesn't he? Presumably, the answer is that human sin is a necessary means to some further providential aim God is seeking to achieve,

in which case sin isn't an unintended side effect of God's plan but rather a component of it, just as George's wrongdoing in *Mob Hit* is part of Jen's plan to get her kids back.<sup>14</sup>

The no-relevant-difference premise isn't out of the woods just yet though. Even if specific human sins are necessary means to some further providential end, it doesn't follow that God *wills* our sins as a means to that end in the way that Jen wills George to hit her in *Mob Hit*. As Justin Mooney has recently shown, there is "a distinction between intended and merely foreseen *means* to an end."<sup>15</sup> Mooney uses this distinction to show that "an agent [can] intentionally bring about a state of affairs without [willing or] intending the means by which she brings about that state of affairs."<sup>16</sup> His example is hand raising.

Suppose I form the intention to raise my hand. If all goes well, this sets into action a chain of physiological cause-and-effect that runs from my brain and down my arms, eventuating in the raising of my hand. But the content of the intention that sets this causal chain in motion is just that I raise my hand, or perhaps that I raise my hand without assistance; it does not include all of the intermediate physiology.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> An analogy often employed by theological determinists is that of an author and his text. God, we are told, is the Divine Author, writing the story of the world, and we are characters in that story. But characters do what they do solely because the author wills that they do it. Their behavior isn't merely permitted, a foreseen but unintended consequence of the author's otherwise justified authorial activity, but rather is intended, part of the author's will.

<sup>15</sup> Mooney, "Divine Intentions and the Problem of Evil," 215.

<sup>16</sup> Mooney, "Divine Intentions and the Problem of Evil," 217.

<sup>17</sup> Mooney, "Divine Intentions and the Problem of Evil," 217.



As this example illustrates, a person can intentionally raise his hand without intending all the physiological events that are necessary for raising his hand. Mooney then argues that something similar can be true of God on theological determinism. God needn't intend evils (including human sins) even if those evils are necessary means to some divine end. Thus, our sin may be a foreseen but not intended means to God's providential ends, and if it is, it could be argued that God is not implicated in our sin in a way that would undermine his standing to blame us for it.

It's this last claim that I take issue with. Granted, God needn't intend each human sin if theological determinism is true, even if each sin is a necessary means to some further providential aim. But just because God doesn't intend each sin doesn't mean he doesn't intentionally bring about each sin. To see this, note that an agent can intentionally do something without intending to do it. I'm intentionally typing each letter of this sentence, but arguably I don't intend to type each letter. (That would take more than sixty separate intentions to write one measly sentence!) One intention—my intention to type the sentence—is all that I needed. As long as that intention nondeviantly guided my typing each letter of the sentence, it can still be true that I intentionally typed each letter even though I didn't specifically intend to type each letter.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, God needn't intend each sin for it to be true that God intentionally causes or brings about those sins. So, we can agree that God may not intend our sin if theological determinism is true. But it doesn't follow that God doesn't intentionally bring about our sin as part of his providential plan. What's more, if theological determinism is true, it's hard to escape the conclusion that God does intentionally bring about each individual sin as part of his plan.

As I argued above, individual human sins seemingly aren't accidental byproducts of God's providential activity, if theological determinism is true, but rather necessary means to

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Mele makes this point using similar examples. See, e.g., Mele, "Decisions, Intentions, and Free Will," 150.

some further divine end. As such, they aren't like my children's bad behavior, which is merely a foreseen but accidental byproduct of my intentional activity. They are, rather, part of God's plan and thus no accident. He brings them about (even if only indirectly) for a reason, which makes his doing so intentional, as anything done for a reason is done intentionally. And, as was the case with Jen in *Mob Hit*, it is God's intentional role in grounding or bringing about people's sin on theological determinism that undermines his standing to blame or punish them for that sin.

### 5. Response to Churchill

I've argued that God lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners if theological determinism is true, and that this is so even if sinners deserve both blame and punishment for their sin. I'll now consider two objections to that conclusion, the first of which is due to Churchill.

As we have seen, Churchill agrees that there is an apparent tension in the thought that God blames sinners for sinful acts that he predetermines them to perform. "[I]t is not at all obvious," Churchill says, "how it can be appropriate for God to blame someone for wrongdoing that was due ultimately and specifically to divine determinism."<sup>19</sup> In the end, however, Churchill believes that theological determinism and divine standing to blame can be reconciled and that the apparent tension between them stems from a false assumption about the nature of divine blame.<sup>20</sup>

Churchill notes that familiar instances of blame often involve or are accompanied by "shocked or incredulous demands for explanation."<sup>21</sup> This is especially true when someone

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<sup>19</sup> Churchill, "Determinism and Divine Blame," 430.

<sup>20</sup> Note that Churchill defends only the compatibility of theological determinism and divine standing to blame. He is silent on the issue of whether theological determinism is compatible with God's standing to punish.

<sup>21</sup> Churchill, "Determinism and Divine Blame," 435.

engages in behavior we regard as unconscionable. In such cases we might express our incredulity by asking the person how they could do such a thing. As Churchill points out,

This is familiar language in our everyday blaming practices. If I hear it from a loved one, I recognize it as a demand to explain my behavior—to give an account as to why I acted as I did rather than acting otherwise. Furthermore, I recognize the demand as one that assumes that my explanation will provide no excuse or justification for my action, but rather will end in my acknowledgment that I have behaved badly; indeed, in this sense the questions are more like expressions of shock or incredulity at my behavior than requests for information.<sup>22</sup>

But, as Churchill goes on to note,

such a demand from God would seem to be deeply problematic within the framework of theological determinism, on the grounds that it would be insincere in the extreme. For surely the God who has determined me to sin—where such determination is the fundamental reason why I sin rather than refrain—cannot sincerely confront me with anything like shocked or incredulous demands that I explain that very sin.

Thus, as Churchill sees it, the problem with divine blame, given theological determinism, is one of *insincerity*, as “a God who determines an agent’s wrongdoing cannot sincerely confront that

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<sup>22</sup> Churchill, “Determinism and Divine Blame,” 433-434.

agent with anything analogous to the kind of shocked or incredulous demand for explanation that is common to the expression of human blame.”<sup>23</sup>

The solution to this problem, Churchill argues, is to recognize that blame, including divine blame, doesn’t necessarily involve demands that the sinner explain their bad behavior. He gives the example of Hamlet, who “blames Claudius for multiple offenses, as is evident in his anger and resentment,” but who “is uninterested in hearing Claudius give any account of his wrongdoing; he makes no demands—incredulous or otherwise—that are intended to force Claudius to acknowledge his sin.”<sup>24</sup> More generally, Churchill points out that there are several accounts of blame according to which blame doesn’t essentially involve demands for explanation. Thus, in blaming sinners for sin that God determines them to commit, God needn’t make a disingenuous demand for explanation and thus needn’t be guilty of insincerity.

The difficulty with this attempt by Churchill to reconcile theological determinism with divine standing to blame is that it misdiagnoses the problem. Granted, blame needn’t involve a demand for explanation, and thus God, in blaming sinners for sin he determines them to commit, needn’t be guilty of making an insincere demand. But, as I’ve argued, blame is a form opposition to, and perhaps even protest of, the act for which one is blaming the agent, and God can’t in good faith oppose or protest or condemn sinful behavior that he purposefully brought about.

Churchill is sensitive to this point, or one close to it. He notes that “such blame [i.e., blame that involves divine wrath at sinners] looks very strange, at first glance anyway. Even if the alleged problem of insincerity is solved, the fact remains that divine blame on the theological

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<sup>23</sup> Churchill, “Determinism and Divine Blame,” 436.

<sup>24</sup> Churchill, “Determinism and Divine Blame,” 435.

determinist's account appears quite alien to us."<sup>25</sup> However, he goes on to try to make blame of this sort intelligible by drawing a comparison between God, on theological determinism, and human authors and their attitudes to characters in their literary works. To this end, he notes several authors who report experiencing various blaming emotions towards their characters even though the authors exercise total control over those characters' behavior in much the same way that God, on theological determinism, exercises total control over the behavior of sinners.

Though interesting, I'm not persuaded that this comparison with human authors helps make intelligible divine blame for sin that is ultimately a result of divine determination. I suspect the reason anyone, whether authors or their audiences, can experience blaming emotions towards fictional characters has to do with our ability to suspend disbelief and imaginatively enter into the fictional world, a process which involves treating the characters as if they were their own person, not mere creatures of authors' imaginations and slaves to their wills. More importantly, though, even if divine blame can be made *intelligible* on the assumption that theological determinism is true, that still wouldn't explain how it could be *appropriate*.

Imagine that Judas is standing before the judgement seat of God, and that God proceeds to unleash his (righteous?) indignation and wrath on Judas for his sin. Even if we agree that Judas is blameworthy for that sin, there still seems to be something inappropriate about God's wrath at Judas and expressions thereof given that God determined Judas to behave as he did. As I argued above, in blaming Judas, God would be expressing condemnation of something that (all things considered) he preferred to occur and that he saw fit to intentionally bring about. But one can't in good faith both actively promote something in this way and also oppose and condemn it.

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<sup>25</sup> Churchill, "Determinism and Divine Blame," 437.

To elaborate, here again I think Churchill has misdiagnosed the worry for the (soft) theological determinist. The problem, as I see it, isn't that, or isn't only that, "divine blame on the theological determinist's account appears quite alien to us." That's a problem of intelligibility. The problem, rather, is one of appropriateness. It seems not just psychologically *odd* for God to blame sinners for sin he specifically determines them to commit; it also seems *inappropriate*. So, to address the problem, it's not enough to make it psychologically intelligible how God could blame or punish those he determines to sin. After all, many blaming and punishing responses are intelligible yet inappropriate. One must also show that it would be appropriate for God to blame or punish sinners for sin he determines them to commit.

#### 6. Response to Todd

In a recent paper, Patrick Todd attempts to do just that (on the assumption that determinism is compatible with creaturely freedom and responsibility).<sup>26</sup> Todd argues that, contrary to what I've claimed, God isn't open to the charge of acting in bad faith if he both determines people to sin and then blames and punishes them for the very sin he determines them to commit. Just because God determines someone to sin, Todd says, doesn't mean that God approves of the person's bad behavior or that God doesn't care about the relevant moral values. Take lying, for example.

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<sup>26</sup> Readers should note that, on Todd's view, it would be inappropriate for God to blame sinners for their sin if theological determinism is true. However, he thinks this because he believes that theological determinism is incompatible with blameworthiness. Thus, on his view, it would be inappropriate for God to blame sinners for their sin because they are not blameworthy for their sin. If they were—if soft theological determinism were true—then Todd thinks that it would be perfectly appropriate for God to blame sinners for sins he determined them to commit.

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.<sup>27</sup>

We therefore can't accuse God of acting in bad faith if God both determines a person to be dishonest and also condemns (e.g., by blaming or punishing the person for) that very dishonesty.

Jen, you may recall, supports peaceful conflict resolution, and thus opposes responding to petty insults with violence. Evidently, though, she is willing to allow such behavior, and indeed to do everything she can to promote it, if doing so is absolutely necessary to achieve her good purposes. Her willingness to do this needn't involve a repudiation of her moral values or her *general* commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. It's just that, *in specific instances*, she recognizes that she is justified in acting in ways that override that general commitment.

Similar things appear to be true of God, if theological determinism is true. God may have a general policy in favor of honesty, but may also see the need, in particular instances, to ensure that people are dishonest. Todd is correct that this needn't impugn God's general opposition to dishonesty. However, the fact that God's *general* opposition to dishonesty is intact is consistent with his promotion of particular instances of dishonesty if doing so is necessary to achieve

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<sup>27</sup>Todd, "Does God Have the Moral Standing to Blame?" 47.

certain providential aims. But, again, God can't in good faith both promote a lie by intentionally bringing it about that someone tells the lie and yet oppose that same lie, and thus can't in good faith both determine the lie as part of his overall providential plan and blame the liar for it.

To further motivate the point, consider the following example from Todd:

Jonas is a Nazi commander working in a death camp. However...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.<sup>28</sup>

Todd points out—correctly, it seems to me—that, although Jonas was instrumental in bringing it about that Thomas did what he did, Jonas doesn't forfeit the standing to blame Thomas.

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<sup>28</sup> Todd, "Does God Have the Moral Standing to Blame?" 40-41.



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...but that gives you no excuse; you should have disobeyed my orders, even at great risk to yourself.”<sup>29</sup>

So far, so good. However, there are some important features of this case that we should take note of which make it importantly different from both *Mob Hit* and theological determinism.

Notice that, although Jonas does something that contributes to Thomas’s evil action, he doesn’t in fact support that action, not even as a means to a greater good, nor does he try to bring it about that Thomas performs the action. On the contrary, Jonas hopes Thomas will show mercy. Indeed, he chooses Thomas precisely because he believes Thomas to be the most likely among his subordinates to disobey his orders. Jonas thus does everything he can, consistent with his ultimate end of retaining his position, to prevent Thomas from sounding the alarm. In these respects, Jonas is different than Jen in *Mob Hit* and different, too, from God given theological determinism, both of whom want the evil deed done (to achieve a greater good) and both of whom intentionally bring about the evil deed and, in God’s case, ensure that it is done.

To highlight the importance of these differences, consider a variation of Todd’s case. Imagine that everything is the same as before except that Jonas knows that, as much as he hates it, maintaining his status “as a trusted commander” may sometimes require him to do all he can to facilitate the capture and execution of prisoners who attempt to escape, as this will be the only way for him to convince his superiors that he is sufficiently committed to the cause to maintain his current post. So, when Jonas learns that a prisoner may be planning an escape, he orders

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<sup>29</sup> Todd, “Does God Have the Moral Standing to Blame?” 41.

Mark, one of his other subordinates, to investigate and to sound the alarm if anyone tries to escape. Jonas chooses Mark because he knows that, of all his subordinates, Mark is the *least* likely to have mercy on escaping prisoners or to disobey Jonas's orders. Just to be sure, though, Jonas gives Mark a stern reminder of his duties as a soldier and even threatens Mark with execution should he have the temerity to disobey orders. Later, when Mark catches the escaping prisoner, he sounds the alarm, and the prisoner is captured and executed by Jonas's superiors.

In this version of the case, Jonas arguably does lack the standing to blame Mark for sounding the alarm. Hearing the alarm, it would not be appropriate for Jonas to inwardly condemn Mark for not showing mercy, nor would it be appropriate for Jonas to confront Mark. He can't indignantly say to Mark, as he might have said to Thomas in the original version of the story, "you should have disobeyed my orders, even at great risk to yourself." That may be true, but, given that Jonas actively tried to bring about Mark's obedience, doing everything he could to ensure that Mark obeyed the order, such opposition to Mark's behavior seems disingenuous. Here Mark could legitimately reply, in a way that Thomas from the original example could not, "Who are you to blame me for what I did? You wanted me to do this. You picked me because you knew I was the most likely to carry out your orders. You then ordered me to do just what I did, hoping I would obey, and then you did everything you could to ensure that I did obey!" This may not provide Mark with an excuse, but it does highlight the fact that Jonas is implicated in Mark's bad behavior in a way or to a degree that he isn't implicated in Thomas's, a way that makes it inappropriate for him to blame or sanction Mark for that behavior. Although Jonas regrets that he had to facilitate Mark's bad behavior, he can't honestly protest or otherwise oppose that same behavior when he (Jonas) did everything in his power to bring it about.

Let's consider another of Todd's examples before proceeding. In this next example, "Bob's house has been getting broken into regularly," and "Bob knows that Fred is the culprit," but he doesn't yet have sufficient evidence to prove Fred's guilt. So, in an effort to catch Fred in the act and prove his guilt, "Bob invites Fred over and sets out an expensive item where he thinks Fred will see it and likely steal it; if he does so, Bob will have caught Fred's thievery on tape. Sure enough, Fred takes the item." In this case, Todd says, "Bob can certainly blame Fred for stealing the item." We might also think that Bob would be well within his rights to prosecute Fred for the theft, even though Fred acted just as Bob intended him to act.<sup>30</sup>

Cases like this seem to suggest that, contrary to what I've argued, there is nothing objectionable about promoting someone's bad behavior (assuming one has a sufficiently good reason to do so) and then blaming and sanctioning them for it. In fact, however, I think this appearance is illusory. Our sense that it would be appropriate for Bob to blame and prosecute Fred for the theft despite being implicated in it stems largely from the fact that Fred has, without any prompting from Bob, been stealing from Bob for a while now, and it's certainly appropriate for Bob to blame Fred for that and to prosecute him for it. If we remove these features from the case, I think our sense that Bob retains the standing to blame Fred dissipates considerably.

To see this, suppose Fred has never stolen anything from anyone, though, as Bob knows, Fred is sometimes tempted to steal. As in the original version of the story, Bob does all he can (consistent with Fred's free will and moral responsibility) to induce Fred to steal something from him, and he does so for a good reason. (We can imagine, for example, that Bob too is being threatened by the mob in such a way that justifies his promotion of Fred's thievery.) Sure enough, Bob's plan works; Fred succumbs to the temptation and steals the item from Bob.

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<sup>30</sup> Todd, "Manipulation and Moral Standing," 8.

In this version of the case, it's not obvious that Bob retains the standing to blame Fred. Indeed, it seems to me that he doesn't have the standing to blame or sanction Fred. After all, the case is now relevantly similar to *Mob Hit*. So, given that Jen lacks the standing to blame George for slapping her, so too Bob lacks the standing to blame Fred for the theft. If this is correct, it suggests that Bob doesn't have the standing to blame or sanction Fred for the theft in the original case either. The sense that Bob has the standing to blame and sanction Fred for the theft in that original case is due, I suggest, to the fact that he does have the standing to blame Fred for the prior thefts that Fred committed on his own steam, independently of any influence from Bob.<sup>31</sup>

### 7. Indeterministic Providence and Divine Standing

I've argued that theological determinism is incompatible with the claim that God has the standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin, and that this is so even if sinners deserve both blame and punishment for sin God determines them to commit, and thus even if theological determinism is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. However, careful readers will have noted that, according to the argument I've defended, God's standing to blame on theological determinism is compromised by the fact that God intentionally brings about human sin. However, God might intentionally bring about a certain event without determining that it occur. We can image an indeterministic view of divine providence according to which God intentionally brings about everything that happens, human behavior included, but does so indeterministically (in much the same way that Jen's efforts in *Mob Hit* may have indeterministically contributed to George's bad behavior). Everything I've said about theological determinism would apply to this indeterministic theory of divine providence as well. God

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<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Marla Capes for helping me think through this point.

couldn't in good faith blame people for sin he intentionally (albeit indeterministically) caused them to commit. By itself, then, adding indeterminism to our view of divine providence doesn't automatically salvage God's standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin.

Typical indeterministic theories of divine providence, however, don't claim that specific human sins are regularly a part of the divine plan. Although God may foresee that human creatures will sin, their sin typically isn't part of God's plan.<sup>32</sup> Thus, while God may permit human sin on these other views, it isn't something that he wills or intentionally brings about.

This is even true of Molinism, which provides the strongest nondeterministic view of divine providence. According to Molinism, God doesn't determine people's behavior, but he does know what any possible person would freely do in any situation in which he might place them, and God uses this knowledge to orchestrate history to his ends. However, Molinism as such isn't committed to the view that God places people in specific circumstances in which they sin because he wants them to sin and knows that placing them in those circumstances will (indeterministically) yield the desired result. God may place people in specific circumstances for a variety of different reasons. That they sin may simply be a foreseen but undesired and unintended side effect of God's providential activity. If it is, then God's standing to blame them for their sin isn't obviously compromised, since God doesn't intentionally bring about their sin even if he foresees it. It's only if God intentionally brings about people's sins by placing them in the relevant circumstances in an effort to bring it about that they commit those sins (knowing they will do so if placed in those circumstances) that God, on Molinism, would be implicated in human sin in a way that might compromise God's standing to blame and punish sinners.

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<sup>32</sup> I say "typically" because all the major indeterministic theories of divine providence can make room for the possibility that God occasionally wills, and even determines, people to commit specific wrongs.

## 8. Implications

I've argued that God lacks the standing to blame or punish sinners for their sin if theological determinism is true, and that this is so even if sinners deserve both blame and punishment for their sin, and thus even if theological determinism is compatible with human freedom and responsibility. I conclude by briefly noting three important implications of this view.

One obvious implication concerns theological traditions that affirm both theological determinism and the claim that God has the standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin. The argument put forward here raises difficulties for traditions of this sort insofar as it suggests that they can't correctly affirm both doctrinal claims. If they want to keep theological determinism, they should give up the claim that God has the standing to blame and punish sinners, whereas if they want to retain the claim that God has the standing to blame and punish sinners, they should give up theological determinism. But they can't have both.

This brings us to a second, and closely related, implication. To the extent that God's standing to blame and punish sinners for their sin is central to one's theological worldview, one has reason to reject theological determinism, a reason that's independent of the perennial dispute about whether theological determinism is compatible with human free will and moral responsibility. Thus, even compatibilists (those who think theological determinism is compatible with human freedom and responsibility) may have reason to reject theological determinism.

The third implication of the position I've defended concerns the following argument for incompatibilism about moral responsibility and (theological) determinism proffered by Todd.

1. On theological determinism, God cannot blame us for the wrong actions we perform, even if we meet all compatibilist conditions for being morally responsible with respect to performing them.
2. The best explanation for the truth of (1) is incompatibilism.

So,

3. Incompatibilism is true.<sup>33</sup>

If the position here defended is correct, premise 2 of this argument is false; incompatibilism isn't the *best* explanation of 1. An equally good explanation is that God would be acting in bad faith were he to blame or punish people for sin he determined them to commit, as he would thereby be opposing behavior that he intentionally brought about and even deliberately ensured.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Todd, "Manipulation and Moral Standing: An Argument for Incompatibilism," 5.

<sup>34</sup> I'm grateful to Marla Capes, Peter Furlong, Jordon Hampton, Katherine Sweet, Philip Swenson, Patrick Todd, and Johnny Waldrop for helpful discussions about the argument of the paper. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Samford University in March 2024. My thanks to members of the audience for helpful feedback. Special thanks to Taylor Cyr and two anonymous referees who read and provided helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper.

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