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Heath White, FATE AND FREE WILL: A DEFENSE OF THEOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

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Fate and Free Will: A Defense of Theological Determinism, by Heath White. University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 396. $65.00 (hardcover).

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The constellation of issues addressed in this stimulating book—human freedom; the problem of evil; divine foreknowledge, providence and sovereignty—has attracted an enormous amount of attention from Christian philosophers. Unsurprisingly, no consensus has emerged, so new treatments of these issues are always welcome. And since most contemporary philosophers (myself included) have approached the problem with a libertarian understanding of free agency, monographs that challenge this understanding are of especial interest.

White's book is a defense of *Theological Determinism*, or "TD." (Despite its title, fate is hardly mentioned in the book, and then only to forestall possible confusion with determinism.) TD has to be taken seriously, if only because it's so well-situated in the theological tradition. White doesn't claim to provide a knock-down argument for TD. Rather, he aims to persuade fellow philosophers that TD is *competitive* (despite the widespread assumption to the contrary), thereby "rais[ing] its status" in the debate (12).

TD, as White defends it, is the thesis that facts about God's will determine, and are explanatorily prior to, every other contingent fact (6). Under TD, God exercises "primary causation" with respect to creation by bringing an entire 4-dimensional block into existence *ex nihilo* and "at once." Despite its explanatory priority, God's creative decree does not override, or "crowd out," or in any way qualify the "secondary causation" at work within the world. White asks his reader to consider the various causal possibilities—combinations of determinism, indeterminism, even agent causation, if that's a coherent notion (23)—if God is left out of the picture. He continues:

> Whatever causal theory you believed in before, keep believing in it, and call it "secondary." Then just mentally add that God creates the whole thing in one single act, and call that action "primary." There is no conflict between the two types of cause. (24)

Though the *intramundane* causal regime needn't be deterministic, this is still a TD world, because it was brought into existence *in toto* via divine fiat, and every fact about it is determined by God's will.

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Divine primary causation isn't just explanatorily prior to any secondary causation that might obtain within the world; it's a different kind and order of causation altogether. That makes it pretty mysterious, perhaps understandable only by analogy. White's "preferred form of TD imagines God as an author in relation to his characters" (20)—with the exception, of course, that the characters God writes into existence are real rather than fictional. While the story is determined in every detail by the author, it's up to the author whether events *within* the story are determined by other events within the story, or occur completely at random. It's also up to the author whether the characters in the story are free or unfree.

Is it up to the divine author whether the world includes *libertarian* freedom? It's worth contrasting White's answer here with that of two other theological determinists, Hugh McCann and Derk Pereboom. McCann (who also relies heavily on the author analogy) is an incompatibilist about free will and intramundane (naturalistic) determinism, but a compatibilist about free will and theological determinism. He argues that if God authors into existence a world in which the intramundane conditions for free will are satisfied, they are satisfied full stop: God's authoring this world changes nothing. For McCann, then, it is up to the divine author whether the world includes libertarian freedom. Pereboom, on the other hand, is an incompatibilist about both naturalistic and theological determinism, so he would deny that the TD God has the option of creating a world with libertarian (or *any* genuine) free agency. (He also holds, on empirical grounds, that naturalistic determinism is almost certainly true—so there's no free will, even before God is added to the picture.)

White is a thoroughgoing compatibilist. The TD God can actualize a storyline featuring agents with genuine free will (*pace* Pereboom), but this free will cannot be libertarian (*pace* McCann). There are two strands making up libertarian freedom: the alternatives condition,

> PAP: S does A freely only if, given all the facts not in S's control, it is possible for S to do otherwise than A,

and the source condition,

> SRC: S does A freely only if there are no sufficient conditions for S doing A such that S has no control over whether those conditions obtain. (8)

While there seem to be possible worlds satisfying both of these conditions, God's creating such a world would violate these conditions (given the TD account of creation), because facts about God's will, not under S's control, would be sufficient for S's doing A, and preclude S's doing other than A. So TD does not allow for libertarian free will.

White's touchstone for assessing the TD thesis is a "traditional, orthodox" theism involving six elements: omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness (moral perfection), creation *ex nihilo*, atemporal eternity, and a "robust Christian eschatology" of heaven and hell (10–11). His claim is that TD offers a more straightforward account of these elements than

its libertarian competitors: Open Theism, Simple Foreknowledge, and Molinism.

It's *foreknowledge* that's supposed to give the TD God his advantage when it comes to omniscience. The Openist God, to whom future contingents are unavailable, foreknows *less* than the TD God. As for Simple Foreknowledge and Molinism, TD's advantage lies in its forthright explanation of *how* God knows the future: by knowing his own comprehensive will. Molinists explain divine foreknowledge as an inference from middle knowledge, but this just pushes the mystery of divine foreknowledge back onto the mystery of how God comes by his knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. White allows, in the case of Simple Foreknowledge, that an atemporally eternal God could know what is to us future by "seeing" it à la Boethius; but the problem with this explanation is that divine foreknowledge is then post-volitional, limiting its providential utility. (Responding to arguments I've offered in a number of places, White grants that simple foreknowledge might not be *altogether* useless.) It's unclear, however, why TD's advantage here should be credited to *omniscience*, since the TD God's foreknowledge is *also* post-volitional.

Omnipotence is another attribute alleged to give TD an advantage. White's "simple view of omnipotence" is that an agent is omnipotent =df. the agent can bring about any contingent state of affairs (51). Given this definition, the non-TD God, whose creative repertoire includes worlds with libertarian freedom, will be saddled with omnipotence-defeaters: contingent states of affairs, like Jones's scratching his ear of his own libertarian free will, that God cannot bring about, because his doing so would violate their libertarian credentials. White concludes that

> TD has on its side considerations of scope. . .[T]he "number" of states of affairs [the non-TD God] can bring about. . .is considerably fewer than the range of God's power according to TD. As long as there are libertarian-free creatures, there will be possible worlds, that is contingent states of affairs, that God cannot bring about. (52)

Libertarian theists, of course, recognize this limitation on divine omnipotence (cf. Plantinga's distinction between God's *strongly* and *weakly* actualizing a world). What's unclear is whether this really gives a *scope* advantage to TD omnipotence. The non-TD God—who can create all the worlds the TD God can create—faces this limitation only because he *chose* to create a libertarian world. If the TD God can create a libertarian world, he will face the same limitations on his omnipotence—and if he can't, then for that very reason the scope of his omnipotence is arguably *less* than that of the non-TD God.

Of course, given TD, a libertarian world isn't even among the *possibilia* available to divine omnipotence. But this appeal to TD would be circular in the present context since White is citing omnipotence to *argue for* TD. It's actually another item on his list of traditional affirmations, creation *ex nihilo*, that fills the gap. That's because White endorses the *Creation*

Principle: "If God creates *x* out of nothing, the facts about God's will determine all the facts about *x*" (60). White defends this principle against arguments for the coherence of vague, or disjunctive, or indeterministic creative decrees. Readers can determine whether they find these arguments persuasive.

If not, White could simply add divine sovereignty to his list of traditional, orthodox touchstones, because this is where TD's real advantage over its libertarian rivals lies. The Open Theist God is a major risk-taker; the God of Simple Foreknowledge can arguably mitigate risk, but cannot eliminate it; the Molinist God avoids risk altogether, but his creative options are limited by the brute pre-volitional facts about which counterfactuals of freedom are true. Only the TD God can get exactly the world he wants. As White notes at the end of his book, TD's "greatest asset is the especially robust sort of divine providence it underwrites" (345).

To secure this asset, White must reckon with TD's two signal liabilities. One is the challenge TD poses to creaturely freedom, moral responsibility, and the meaningfulness of life itself. This is a serious liability for an incompatibilist like Pereboom. But White thinks that all these goods—the genuine articles, not near-substitutes for them—are available under TD, and the middle chapters of the book, amounting to fully half its length, are devoted to a defense of compatibilism.

When it comes to responsibility, the most fundamental notion for White is *holding responsible.* This is in contrast with the idea that the most fundamental notion is *being responsible*, which is then used as the standard for determining whether it's appropriate to *hold* responsible. Punishment is the predominant way we hold people responsible, and White begins his argument for compatibilism with punishment. "The basic logical structure of punishment and moral blame is the same, I believe, but it is easier to see if we focus on punishment" (78).

The main incompatibilist challenge he must meet "is that the sort of punishment our societies dish out can be justified only if people (really, truly, deeply, ultimately) deserve it" (79). White rejects this "basic desert" requirement in favor of a forward-looking "social maintenance" theory of punishment, justified by its protecting and promoting various social goods. Practices like incapacitation and deterrence, established to secure these goods, lose nothing of their value if determinism is true.

The justification of such practices lies in how well they perform their function. There are other arenas in which we assess people's performances and hold them accountable for failing to meet certain standards: admissions exams, professional certifications, employee reviews, marksmanship tests, etc. Given the purposes of these assessments, a poor performance is excusable if the assessment instrument doesn't accurately measure what it's supposed to measure (because the test is misprinted, the test-taker has kidney stones, etc.). But if excusing conditions like these aren't present, and the person being evaluated really does lack the competencies being evaluated, it doesn't matter how or why the person came to lack those

competencies. "My contention is that holding each other *morally* responsible is a practice with exactly the same structure. . .In such cases, the inevitability of moral failure [as entailed by TD] is no excuse" (156).

At the end of the day, "[b]lameworthiness is a matter of quality of will, and it does not really matter what the source of that poor quality is" (179). In the case of Robert Alton Harris, who killed two boys to use their car in a bank robbery, laughed about it, showed no remorse, etc., if we find out that

> he had an abusive family, was brutalized on numerous occasions, and lacked any positive examples—even if we add that Harris had no responsibility for these facts and that God caused them all—we still learn all we need to know about Harris's character and reason. . .In this case, judging Harris to be blameworthy for his actions is not at all undermined by the claim that those actions, or their causes, were brought about by God. (187)

(White comments: "Perhaps this makes me a mild revisionist about moral responsibility" (196)!) Everyone knows that moral luck plays a role in how people turn out, and we don't really care, in the sense that this doesn't alter the moral judgments we make. But White recognizes that this "marks a stark divide in thinking about free will and moral responsibility" (247).

The other liability accompanying TD is the challenge posed by evil. The more impressive God's creative and providential resources, the more puzzling the existence and extent of the evils to be found in creation. White devotes three chapters to this problem, including its extension into the afterlife. He doesn't aim to solve the problems of evil and of hell, but "to show that TD does *no worse* than extant theistic alternatives in addressing the problem of evil in its various guises" (251).

The Free Will Defense challenges the metaphysical premise of Mackie's famous argument for the logical problem of evil: that "an omnipotent, omniscient being can see to it that there is no evil." White reviews some of this defense's well-known limitations. A more favorable target for TD is the argument's moral premise, that "a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can" (252). White notes that there is quite a "deep bench" of responses to this premise, and he reviews a number of these, including the Greater Good Theodicy, the Natural Order Theodicy, the Soul-Making Theodicy, the O Felix Culpa Theodicy, and the God Owes Us Nothing Theodicy (253–259). All of them can be deployed by TD as well as by libertarian theism.

The problem of gratuitous evil picks up where the problem of the mere existence of evil leaves off. The skeptical theist's response—that we're not in an epistemic position to judge with confidence whether an evil is gratuitous—is just as available to the TD-defender as it is to the libertarian. As for horrendous evils, TD is no less entitled than libertarian theism to invoke Marilyn Adams's proposal "that God will ensure that our lives will be great goods to us in the end" (278).

TD, however, faces an "Is God the author of evil?" problem in a way that libertarian theism does not. White distinguishes here between the

claim that the TD God *causes* evil and the claim that he *intends* evil. He invokes Augustine's privative notion of evil to escape the first. Even if God does not cause evil, in this sense, he is nevertheless responsible for there being evil, and for there being these evils. (The cheesemaker might not cause the holes in the Swiss cheese, but still is responsible for its having those holes.) When it comes to this second problem, however, White argues that God doesn't intend everything for which he's responsible, and he's blameworthy only for what he intends. The TD God, while determining everything that happens, does not intend all of it.

Inseparable from the problem of evil, and "[t]he steepest challenge for TD. . .is the doctrine of hell" (307). Given that White's aim is only to make TD competitive with the libertarian alternatives, the seriousness of this problem (if universalism is taken off the table) actually makes White's job easier: if it's difficult to say what morally sufficient reasons the TD God might have for "creating a populated hell, it is no easier to say what reasons the libertarian's God might have" (313). Whatever those reasons might be, why think they wouldn't work for the TD as well as the non-TD God?

An important attack on hell's fairness appeals to two principles: the Egalitarian Principle,

> EP: God's perfect love must be maximally extended and equally intense,

and the No Unequal Blessings Thesis,

> NUB: If God loves A and B equally, God will not bless A more than B.

White's answer is that the TD God's plan for creation might consist of myriad roles that need to be filled: "Someone has to fill the role of Mother Teresa. . .but someone else has to fill the role of Judas" (322). This is a troublesome answer if one thinks "that God should not have created a world where some individuals are damned if he could have created a world in which they would not be damned in other circumstances." White's response: "I confess that the moral principle underlying the objection eludes me" (335).

There are some hard doctrines here. White writes that when he began the book, he would have classified himself as a "traditional, orthodox Christian," but that he ended as "a hopeful or wishful agnostic." He adds that the reasons were "mostly remote from the issues in this book" (11–12), but one can easily imagine a scenario in which they weren't at all remote. His concluding section on hell is titled, "Maybe It's Not About Us."

I found myself resisting many of White's judgments. While it's certainly not "all about us," it might nevertheless seem that we are *ends* in a more robust way than White's TD allows. It's hard to see how "social maintenance" can do justice to the practice of holding *ourselves* responsible, and as someone whose nightstand always hosts Augustine's *Confessions,* this seems the fundamental practice. Etcetera. *Nevertheless,* it's not as though there is a completely satisfactory non-TD solution to the problems addressed in this book. When White writes that "[a] theological

determinist will. . .have to affirm that the goodness of God is stranger to our eyes than one might naively think" (337), I don't think that anyone who has spent any time thinking about these things can say, with any confidence, that this won't ultimately be true of their own position.

I've barely scratched the surface of this rich book. It's clearly written and organized, fairly and accurately presenting opposing positions (including my own), provocatively challenging libertarian presumptions. Despite my many disagreements with White—better, *because* of those disagreements—I think it is essential reading for anyone interested in the problem of how best to harmonize providence, evil, and free will.

The War that Never Was: Evolution and Christian Theology, by Kenneth W. Kemp. Cascade Books, 2020. Pp. 228. $28.00 (paperback).

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When I received this book for review, it was with some trepidation that *The War That Never Was* would be another conventional effort to reconcile the biblical account of creation with one or more of the various evolutionary theories that have followed Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859). Such efforts, on both sides of this historical dialogue, are frequently rife with partially understood ideas, disingenuous and twisted quotations of the literature from both sides, and conclusions that often bear far too close a resemblance to their initial hypotheses. However, what I found was a unique project that crossed the lines of several disciplines, in the following manner.

Dr. Kenneth Kemp is a Roman Catholic philosopher, and within the introduction of *The War That Never Was*, he makes clear his own position on the twofold matters at hand, as he identifies with the view expressed by Thomas Dobzhansky, a synthesizer of Darwinism and Mendelism, that he is "a creationist and an evolutionist" (23), and holds that, "Like Dobzansky, I believe that God created out of nothing a world that slowly changes over the course of time in accordance with the laws of nature which he established. I believe that scientists have given a generally accurate account of the age of the world and of the processes which have effected its change over time" (23).

However, it is not as a philosopher that Dr. Kemp sets up his present project. He makes clear from the beginning that his intention is to

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