

“God Is Light”: An E-mail Exchange

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<From: JF

To: CP

Hey there, moron. I’ve been reading a book on totalitarianism and came across this quote from Albert Camus: “Violence is both inevitable and unjustifiable.”

Do you think this can be true? If something is inevitable, wouldn’t its inevitability justify it? How could a person be condemned for taking action that is “inevitable”?

Three more weeks until break. Dear God, do I have a ton to do. Regards,

JF.>

<From: CP

To: JF

I have actually thought about the question you raised (I mean, even before you raised it) because it often comes up in discussions of Judeo-Christian theology: “How can God hold anyone morally responsible for their actions if everything that occurs is ‘inevitable’ (to use your/Camus’s word) or ‘predestined’ (to use the familiar term)?”

I guess the only preliminary response I have is that something only becomes certain to us when we have true and justified knowledge of it. Since we don’t have true and justified knowledge of the future, it is not certain to us, and so we are to act, even if our futures *are* predestined and thus set in stone, as though they weren’t.

So I guess Camus could be right. Some things in general (such as violence) *could* be inevitable, given the human makeup and condition, and still be an undetermined, free moral decision in each particular case, to be made rightly or wrongly. Regards, CP.>

<The ways we think on this question in particular point to some interesting differences in the ways we think in general. For instance, in answer to the question you raised, “How can God hold anyone morally responsible for their actions if everything that occurs is ‘inevitable’ (to use your/Camus’ word) or “predestined” (to use the familiar term)?”—I would respond that He could not in fact hold people morally responsible, which is a big part of the reason why I don’t accept the concept of predestination. Predestination has always

seemed to me to be just another form of fatalism, and even a rather depressing form, as opposed to the cheerful tautology, “Whatever will be, will be.” I suppose I see an argument for the idea that we are *responsible* for our actions or that acting in a moral way is best for the good of society, but I can’t see any way around the idea that the concept of predestination would have to release us from any genuine *obligation* to act morally. For one thing, predestination would seem to remove any possibility of a real eternal reward (should one exist), wouldn’t it? How could one be rewarded for something one is predestined to do? In fact, the reward would have to be here-and-now only, i.e., some sort of happiness in knowing that you did the right thing, even though you were predestined to do so anyway.

Also, predestination implies, does it not, that some people just have their special burden from God, horrendous though it may be, that they have to bear. But I can’t embrace the idea of a God who would challenge some humans with these special burdens and not others. It just doesn’t seem fair or just to me that God would do this, and His justice is my favorite part of the concept of Him I have. Regards, JF.>

<Well, this subject has been written about extensively, so I will be bringing in a number of points to try to back up my preliminary position. I’m not even going to worry about the technicality of the subject, since, after all, *you* brought it up.

First of all, “omnipotence” and “omniscience” do not necessarily mean “predestination” in the sense you seem to be taking it as meaning. I think some of your implied premises would be seen as wrong (e.g., “Predestination is a coercive imposition on behavior”; “Coercion removes moral responsibility for behavior”; etc.) so long as we don’t take omniscience as implying an “obligation” to behave one way or the other. For God to know everything and every occurrence is not the same thing as for God to *impose necessity* on every occurrence. The general idea as I understand it is that God is nontemporal, i.e., the future is not “the future” to God as it is to us. Rather, the future is always before God’s awareness in perfect knowledge as the present and past are before our awareness in imperfect knowledge. Therefore, for God to “see” us doing something in the future is the same as “predestination” (since it would be impossible for God to be mistaken in apprehension), but God’s “seeing” the future is not the immediate causal factor of our making decisions and performing actions in what is, to us, still the future. To “see” someone doing something has little or nothing to do with “causing” someone to do something. Regards, CP.>

<You’re going to have to do better than that. First, the whole argument (which I’ve heard before) about God’s being “non-temporal” and “seeing” the future as we see the present and past just seems a bit facile. That might be easy enough for religious believers to swallow, since they’ve already accepted the notion of an eternal, all-knowing being, but is difficult to understand for those not so predisposed. Secondly, your response raises another problem for me. If

God “sees” the future as we “see” the past and present, does that mean that statements about the future are facts *right now*? Even if you say they are, it seems that we cannot know them as facts in the same way that God does. You might not think of that as a problem, but I do, in two ways: (1) It does seem to encourage a fatalistic approach to life, since the future facts that God knows cannot be changed by us. (2) It also seems to break “facts” into two categories: those knowable by us in principle and those not knowable by us in principle. I can see how there might exist facts we do not yet know. My problem is, How can there exist facts not even knowable by us *in principle*? Regards, JF.>

<All right, let me offer something for your consideration as an analogous response to the first part of your communique. Ever since Einstein, we have had some interesting notions about the relation of time and the speed of light. For example, we know that if Observer X were to move at the speed of light outward from the sun, an observer on earth would clock X’s flight to the earth at eight minutes, since the sun is about eight light-minutes from the earth. But how much time would have passed for Observer X? The odd, counter-intuitive answer is that *no time would have passed*. To Observer X, the departure from the sun and the arrival at earth would have occurred simultaneously, although the two would be separated by eight minutes to the earth-bound observer. Now consider the passage of X outward, past our solar system, even outward to other solar systems. Hundreds, even thousands, of years may pass on earth during X’s travel; however, to X, the passage of time would be the same: *No time* would have passed. In the case of these two observers

. . . in one reference frame, all times and all events that pass during those times exist simultaneously while in another reference frame, those same events are separated by time with a past that has occurred and a future that is yet to come,

as Gerald Schroeder puts it in his book, *The Science of God*,

Therefore, to an observer traveling at the speed of light, *all time*, past, present, and future, *would seem to occur simultaneously*: The difference in the perception of the flow of time at the speed of light is not a *quantitative* difference from a lot of time . . . to a much shorter time, however short that period may be. The difference in the flow of time is a *qualitative* difference, the difference between our existence where all events occur through an unceasing temporally linear flow and an existence in which time does not exist. (Schroeder again)

I need hardly point out where I’m going with this: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all,” as the Apostle John says in the Bible. Of course, I recognize this as a metaphor, not a scientific statement; still, sometimes metaphorical pictures are

more revealing than propositional descriptions. We have (at least in theory) a physical analogy for the state of knowledge that theism claims for God, a state in which it is possible for past, present, and future all to be present in a timeless existence. I don't see the necessity of your claim that “fatalism” would follow from this, since we do not possess this state of knowledge. All of our futures are free, so far as we know.

To address the second part of your communique: Does this state of knowledge necessarily require two different kinds of facts, those knowable by us in principle and those not knowable by us in principle? I don't think so. Let me offer some examples of facts to see if this different kind of fact, the one knowable in principle only by God, is *necessarily* required by logic:

1. There exist facts knowable by us in principle, and in fact known by us, such as the answer to the question, “What is the capital city of Iowa?”
2. There exist facts knowable by us in principle, but not yet known by us, such as the answer to the question, “What is the temperature three feet under the surface of Pluto in the exact middle of its sunlit equator?”
3. I also think there exist facts knowable by us in principle, not yet known by us, which also *cannot* be known by us with existential certainty, such as the answer to the question, “How many blades of grass exist on earth?” No test could be devised, it seems to me, to know this with certainty, given the constant growth, deterioration, and consumption of blades of grass worldwide. However, the question is not one which could not *in principle* be answered by us, even though it is one which could not *in fact* be answered by us.

Facts about the future would fit into these categories, all of which are knowable by us in principle; therefore, facts about the future would not require the existence of a separate type of fact, not knowable by us in principle.

You might object, “But all of these facts are facts that exist right now, in the present—even the third type, which you say we cannot know. Facts about the future do not exist right now, in the present, by definition—if they exist, they are in the future—so your examples serve no purpose.”

But remember, to Observer X traveling at the speed of light, facts about the future *would* fall into one of these categories: either facts known by us, or not known by us, or not knowable existentially by us even though knowable in principle. We might turn it into a proposition: “If Observer X is traveling at the speed of light, facts about the future are knowable facts in principle to Observer X, just as much as facts about the past or present are knowable facts in principle, since future facts would occur concurrently with past and present facts.”

Further, let me point out that, at the speed of light, not only does temporal duration break down, but so also does spatial duration. Observer X's presence on the sun and on the earth also would be experienced by Observer X as simultaneous.

This might have some interesting implications for “omnipresence” as well as “omniscience.” All theism claims [all!] is that a perfect being with characteristics analogous to those of Observer X actually does exist. The characteristics are only analogous, since God’s omnipresence is not that of the order of things that travel, whether at the speed of light or not. God’s omnipresence is causal, not that of a being contained in a place.

Perhaps part of the problem so many of us have with this entire discussion is the necessity of analogical predication, the way of analogy discussed by Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* I.13.5-6). We speak of God’s foreknowledge; we speak of predestination. However, as already discussed, to speak of God in terms of temporal linearity is a sort of mistake, and so we should really put quotation marks around parts of those terms: “fore” knowledge and “pre”-destination. What we are actually saying when we use these terms is that, by way of analogy, God’s knowledge of future facts looks like what *would* be a “fore”-knowledge and a “pre”-destination, were that knowledge of future facts to be held by a human.

Thomas V. Morris describes the situation this way:

. . . God does not believe anything *in advance* of the occurrence of anything, because to hold a belief, or to do anything, *prior to or in advance of* anything else is to be a temporal being subject to time. So when the time arrives for me, or for you, to make a decision or to choose one avenue of action over another, God has not *already* held a belief concerning exactly what will be done, and so it seems that there is nothing in our temporal circumstances to prevent our having a real array of options equally available to us. Another way of putting this is to say that God’s eternal knowledge of our actions is more like simultaneous knowledge than it is like advance knowledge.

I think most theists of any variety would agree that God can know whatever is real in whatever way it can be known. But only what is *impossible* is unreal or outside of the realm of God’s knowledge; this does not preclude knowledge of the *potential* as well as knowledge of the *actual* (S. T. I. 14.9). God can therefore know *in the present* what are to us still future contingencies, an idea which is perfectly compatible with the idea of, for example, biblical prophecies. Again, this does not eliminate free choice, since “an omniscient being can know whatever is not impossible to know,” as theologian Norman Geisler writes.

Does this mean that whatever God knows about the future must necessarily happen? In one sense, the answer to this question is yes; in another sense, the answer is no. The answer is yes if the focus of the question is on the necessity of God’s knowledge being infallible; the answer is no if the focus is on God’s infallible knowledge being the *causally necessitating factor* in any future event.

So I conclude: (1) Facts about the future are logically possible. (2) The existence of these facts might lead one to a certain acceptance of predestination on the part of God, but not necessarily to fatalism or a fatalistic

philosophy. (3) Classical theism can be accepted as logically coherent and logically possible, even when it embraces belief in both divine predestination and human freedom simultaneously.

Hope this helps more than hinders your thinking, squirt. Regards, CP.>

<At the risk of prompting another tome out of you for me to wade through, I do have one more objection. And this time, surprise, I think you might even agree with me.

I might agree that classical theism’s approach to divine omniscience, omnipotence, predestination, and human freedom, moral choice, etc., is a logically possible position. At any rate, I will certainly admit that you have worked up an intellectual sweat trying to *make* it plausible to me. However, I am sure that you want more than just bare plausibility. In fact, you want acceptance of the truth of this position, do you not?

However, just to be able to say that a position is logically *possible* doesn’t seem to be saying much. It is logically possible that I have a lion in my room with me now, but it is certainly not likely. It doesn’t make it any more likely if I prove that it’s logically possible that the lion is omniscient and omnipresent, too.

So it still seems to me that the intellectual possibility you have mapped out is just that—another intellectual possibility—and not compelling *of logical necessity* except to those who have already made a volitional commitment to its truth. (Such as yourself.) This volitional commitment seems to me to be a leap of faith, above and beyond the mere acceptance of the rational possibility of your position—not just a belief *that* this position is possibly true, but a belief *in* its truth, or Truth, if you catch my distinction.

Am I right? Regards, JF.>

<Yes, you are right, my friend. Love always. Regards, CP.> Ω