

VOLUNTARISM – The Priority of God’s Will

Learning from the Past: The Problem of Evil, Week 3

- What’s so interesting about the 17th century?
 - Descartes and the Downfall of Aristotelianism
 - The rise of modern philosophy
 - Moderns would describe Aristotelianism as putting little souls in everything.
 - For Descartes, only humans have souls. Material things only have extension (i.e., they are extended in three dimensions)
 - The fall of Aristotelianism opens space for variety & novelty-good & bad
 - A Mechanized World and Compatibilist Freedom
 - Mechanism = All change is by contact / motion
 - Compatibilism = Free will is compatible with determinism
 - Spinozistic Necessitarianism
 - One source of action
 - Everything is necessary
- Voluntarism and a Voluntarist Theodicy
 - Hobbes’s Theodicy
 - Voluntarism background
 - Descartes’ Extreme Voluntarism
 - Objections to Voluntarism
 - Objections to the Voluntarist Theodicy

Thomas Hobbes’s Theodicy

... If they had been subtle, they would easily have discovered the difference between the cause and the author of a deed. The author of a deed is he who commands that it be done; the cause is he through whose powers it is done. God does not command that anyone do (or attempt) anything contrary to the laws; but whatever we do, we do by powers given us by God. Why, then, if God is in the cause, are we condemned? If you ask this, tell me why, from eternity, God has elected some, and rejected others, and how he condemned to eternal and most severe punishments those who had not yet done (or thought) evil, and who (unless God was willing and gave them the power) could not do or think evil? Tell me also whether it is not lawful for the potter to decide whatever he wishes concerning the vase he has made. Show me, finally, where Scriptures plainly say that all those who are excluded from the kingdom of God will live without a second death, to be tortured to eternity. (*Leviathan*, Chapter xlvi [Latin edition, 1668], §22.)

The author is the one with moral responsibility. If I send a messenger to you, I am responsible for the contents of the message, though the messenger is the immediate cause of the words being formed. In *Home Alone*, the paint can might be the cause of the crooks’ pain, but Kevin is its author. Hobbes claims that God is the cause of sin, but that God isn’t the author of sin. He then must respond to the objection: why are humans punished?

Hobbes’s answer: God can do what he wants. Hobbes’s ethics is based on power. Before thinking about any government, if you have the ability to do something, you have the right to do it. In a sense, then, the more power one has the more rights one has. When we are forced to set up a government, we transfer nearly all of our rights to the sovereign, who then has all the power and can do (nearly) whatever he wants. If we extend this reasoning to God, then we can see that God has unlimited rights and can create us however he wants.

(By the way, concerning Romans 9:19-23: the question seems to be about why God finds fault given that his mercy is so effective and can be given to anyone.)

Voluntarism Background

- Before looking at this voluntarist theodicy, I'd like to look at voluntarism in general.
- Plato's *Euthyphro*: "The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods"
- For the divine command theorist, facts about morality fall under God's free knowledge rather than God's natural knowledge. There are contingent on God's will.

Descartes' Extreme Voluntarism

Regarding necessary truths (like $2+2=4$ or 'the whole is larger than the part'): "You will be told that if God has *established* these truths, he could also change them as a King changes his laws. To which it must be replied: yes, if his will can change." (Letter to Mersenne, April 15, 1630)

"As to the difficulty of conceiving how it was both free and indifferent for God to bring it about that it was not true that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories cannot both be true, it is easy to remove this difficulty by considering that the power of God can have no limits. Then we can also consider that our mind is finite and created with such a nature that it can conceive as possible the things that God willed to be truly possible, but not created in such a way that it can also conceive as possible things that he could have willed possible but nevertheless he willed to make impossible." (Letter to Mesland, May 2, 1644)

Objections to Voluntarism

- Arbitrariness
- Weird Possibilities
- Goodness?

Objections to the Voluntarist Theodicy

- Motivation
- Weird Possibilities
- Defense of Goodness?