Does God 'Act'? 

Transcript

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Does God act directly in the world? Or did God create the world and limit His activity to that? Could God act now, and intervene to stop a war on Iraq, for example?

At one end of the spectrum of views on this matter is the view known historically as Deism; still a widely-held view, in a way, although people do not often call themselves Deists anymore, for it has an eighteenth-century ring to it. The deist thinks that God set the world up and has since taken early retirement to leave it and its inhabitants to get on with things without His active assistance. Thus, while this was a notion that came to prominence during the Enlightenment, it is not unlike a view held by many today who think that there must some ultimate creator, but not one who engages in hearing and answering prayers, knows us each by name, and performs miracles when absolutely necessary. So this God does not rush in like Superman to save the day and would not be on hand to zap missiles as they fly.

At the other end of the spectrum come views described variously as ‘occasionalism’, ‘universal divine sovereignty’, or ‘omnideterminism’. On this view, nothing at all (not even evil, according to some proponents) lies outside the scope of God’s activity. God’s hand is in some way behind every event, including those in which we dirty our own hands. So this God is the one without whom war on Iraq would not be possible; it could only go forward if, in some way, it was His will.

The first question this raises is whether you see the universe as ‘open’ or as ‘closed’ to divine action. Can God reach into the world somehow to do things in it, or is it a tightly-sealed web of purely material cause-and-effect which God created?

Maurice Wiles argued that God does not act directly in the world in particular, isolated events. God doesn’t maintain a tight control over every happening. Instead, God gives us freedom, even over against God himself. God limits Himself in creation, especially in creating human beings with free will. This is necessary in order to have the stability of the material universe so that we can not only act but also see the consequences of our actions. God intervening constantly on a large scale would undermine the point of free will. So Wiles maintains this view for two reasons: first, because it is demanded by an understanding of the origin of evil as found in human free will. Secondly, because the regularity of nature shows that it is impossible that God be intervening on certain occasions, but not others.

At the other extreme, but still Christian, Vernon White holds the stronger, bolder thesis of universal divine sovereignty—God’s control over every event. So contrary to Wiles, White says the very fact of the regularity of nature does not preclude divine action and involvement in it. Divine involvement is a different order of explanation; it is not an explanation for any gaps in the scientific accounts given. God’s action is ‘transcendent and hidden within all worldly occurrences’. It transcends the events, yet is implicit within them; it is a cause of worldly events, but in a different way from material causes. God then can act, that is, express his intentions, in and through the world in a way analogous to the way that we can move our bodies and thereby ‘invest them with meaning and purpose’. This can happen both through events in the world, but also as God acting through other agents, such as ourselves.

Last term we looked at Process Theology, a view of God which sees God as working through the cosmos to achieve his desires; not by coercion but by persuasion. That is one possibility for trying to find a middle way between Wiles modern deism and White’s theological determinism. But there are other ways.

Keith Ward speaks of ‘the death of the closed universe’; and in the light of modern physics, he rejects the view of the world as a self-contained system closed to the presence and action of God. The ‘closed universe view’ is not even tenable nowadays on purely scientific grounds, he argues. The understanding we now have of how we use scientific models holds that no single model fits the world exactly; nor is a complete explanation ever possible. It is false to suppose there is a complete model with a few gaps in it in which God might work. Rather, ‘there is no consistent and complete model at all; so gaps do not become apparent in the model.’ They lie outside it. God’s action may be invisible in way that laws of physics are, Ward suggests. God’s action is not, however, completely invisible and impossible to detect or assert; aside from the visible fact that the universe exists at all, God is also continually bringing new states of the universe into being, leaving many alternatives open to our free choice. Ward suggests that there are at least five kinds of divine action:
1. The act of bringing universe into being
2. Particular acts of imaginative development which shape the universe in contingent ways
4. Acts by which God relates in a distinctively personal way to created persons, in revelation, etc.
5. Acts of redemptive shaping of good out of evil to achieve a final consummation.

The acts of God in nature will be those hidden but all-pervasive causal influences which shape the emergent processes of physical reality towards goals which take specific form only in the process itself, but the general character of which are laid down as archetypes in the being of God.

Thomas Tracy similarly argues that God’s action can be seen in those areas of reality which modern physics suggests are indeterminate. So God can act indirectly, but God can also act directly, direct action that determines natural indeterminacies within the regular structures of nature. Some events are not determined through causal sequences; either because they are incomplete or because there are the result of free human actions. God could act in events of either kind.

Thus both Ward and Tracy find a niche for God’s action in the physical universe in the suggestion from modern physics that events occur which are not entirely determined by causes. It is on this plane that God can intervene to effect results in the material world, without even being judged to ‘violate natural laws’. These suggestions could provide an account of God’s agency in the world which satisfy the mainstream monotheist, without giving offence to modern scientific sensibilities. But it does look a little apologetic; as if they are trying to find nooks and crannies for God’s action in areas that do not offend our modern (or post-modern) scientific reason. There are other ways and different paths.

In different eras, the most difficult question was to conceive of a way that an immaterial God can act in a material world, because this was felt to be either contradictory or unseemly. Our attitude towards matter is more dynamic nowadays; and meanwhile, our attitude to our own human freedom, independence, and power is more assertive than it once was. So in some ways, the more intractable problem today in Jewish and Christian circles is not how to understand God’s action in the material world; but how to square it with human freedom and agency.

Many seem to assume that if it is claimed that God did something, then a human being did not do it. Typically, though, the middle-of-the-road theist wants to assert all the following things: that there is human free will and moral responsibility; that our actions are effective; and therefore we bear the responsibility for them and their effects; and at the same time, that God does act in the world too and moreover is all-powerful. If so, the middle-of-the-road theist has some explaining to do. How can such divine action and human action exist side by side, so that God is unhindered yet human beings are completely responsible and accountable?

Austin Farrer created a concept called ‘double agency’. ‘Double agency’ is a concept which suggests that both God and a human being can cause an event, because the nature of God’s action is to work in and through other agents. Farrer writes: ‘God’s agency must actually be such as to work omnipotently on, in, or through creaturely agencies without either forcing them or competing with them.’ The agency of God and creatures must understood as being on two different levels.

In one event both the divine and creaturely agents are fully active. God has not overwhelmed the finite agent so that it is merely a passive instrument, and God is not simply the creator and sustainer who allows the creaturely agent to act independently of divine agency. Furthermore, the divine and finite agents are not merely complementary, that is, they do not contribute distinct parts to the one event. As many authors have put it, God acts in and through the finite agent which also acts in the event.

‘Double agency’ is not a number of things:

· A case where two agents co-operate, each one contributing part of the action, as when two people pull a boat out of the water. One does not want to suggest that God needs help, nor that the human being doesn’t really accomplish the act.
· A case of two people doing two different things to create one effect, as when one person has a hand on the tiller and another holds the sails.
· Nor something like a state of affairs in which I ‘give my younger son some chocolate’ by handing it to his older brother and asking him to pass it on.

‘Double agency’ means the two agents are doing the same things - not humans and God each doing different things to contribute to the same event. Yet there must be some distinction between the divine and the human action. This is rather difficult to get clear. If there is a genuine unity of action, there is no duality of causes, and if there is duality of causes, there is no
unity of action, no single event.

Vernon White, whose account we looked at a moment ago, wants to see God as acting through everything, even human action. White observes that even in the purely human sphere, we can act through another’s action without coercion or reducing the other to utter passivity. ‘This is especially true in intimate personal relations where the straightforward category of cause and effect will not contain what actually happens.’ He offers the analogy of trustees acting to make sure a client’s wishes are carried out. In God’s case, this happens universally, perfectly, and with aseity. He insists that this does not compromise human freedom. God arranges reality so that whatever I decide to do, God still makes it carry God’s ultimate intentions. Every sequence of events begins with God’s will, and is developed in interaction with our own intentions and acts, ‘so that it develops both in accordance with its own nature and the divine intention which knows what each interaction will in fact produce.’ If a human being acts in a way contrary to God’s ultimate purposes, ‘all other relevant interlocking sequences will have accommodated this fact “from the beginning”. ‘Whatever happens is encompassed without uncertainty, within a higher meaning of God’s intention.’

Thomas Tracy is less comfortable saying that God is the direct and total cause of every finite event. He worries that this might make creatures just the opportunity for God exercising power; so the action is really God’s, and not the human’s. So although he speaks of God acting directly and also indirectly, he writes: ‘If our acts are directly enacted by God, then there is an important sense in which they are not free, and if they are free in this strong sense, then they cannot be direct acts of God. In his view, we must continue to grapple with what he calls the ‘mutually limiting character of claims about human freedom and divine agency’.

Now, do we need to see the divine and the human as limiting one another? Why not see the divine as enabling and empowering human activity? As we explored in the lectures last term, it may be a mistake to see God’s transcendence as the contrast to or the denial of the human. This has the paradoxical result of imprisoning God within boundaries and making Him finite.

Some Catholic thinkers like David Burrell or Kathryn Tanner draw on traditions found in Thomas Aquinas, which see divine providence as working through creatures, ‘from the abundance of divine goodness imparting to creatures also the dignity of causing’. This Thomist view sees God’s activity first as bringing everything into existence which also means that every thing is not just created, but created as it is, with the activity and desires that it has. God’s action then does not ‘vastly exceed’ our own (language found, for example, in Thomas Tracy). God’s action is nothing like our own. It is not the far part on the continuum, it is something else entirely.

From Burrell’s critique, we can begin to speculate that the secret core of this issue is the understanding of how language operates in religious discourse. Let us look at several other writers whose accounts of God’s action bring this to fore, and use a conscious understanding of how language functions to clarify the question of the relationship between God and humanity.

Gareth Moore points to a Gospel story where Jesus stills a storm, as a reminder that talking of God’s action does not mean that God acts on things. The story indicates an ‘alternative kind of language that has always been prominent in the Christian tradition’; one not of causality but of command, not of power so much as authority. God is said to create by command, which makes clear that God does not do anything to things, does not act upon them, does not interfere with them, make them different from what they would otherwise have been. There is no temptation to postulate an invisible agent behind the scenes who brings about events as causes bring about their effects. To understand events as having been brought about by God is, on this model, to see them not as effects of somebody with great power, great strength, but as signs of somebody with great authority.

In miracle stories, there is no divine causal mechanism at work. In fact, the essential point is that no causal mechanism is involved, and is precisely why we are inclined to call it a miracle. To ask ‘how’ the miracle happened and treat that as the meaning of the story is to reduce God’s action to a series of tricks. But when we say ‘God acted’, we do not work out by a process of elimination that God must have done it. Nor are there two things whose relation we must understand: God’s command and the event. They are not separate events. To see something happening in the natural world is precisely to see God’s command being obeyed. According to Moore, ‘I cannot suspect, for instance, that the snow is not really obeying God but was going to fall anyway, or that it misheard or misread the command.’ This just is the language that we use to describe the relation between God and the world. So if snow falls in London in January, we do not imagine that happily its agenda and God’s agenda agreed. Nor do we think that God didn’t want it to snow but the snowflakes, ready to jump with their little white parachutes, didn’t get the order right. To see something happen in the natural world, for the believer, is to see God’s will being realised.
So to say something has been done by God is to react to it in a particular way, not ‘to infer that the event in question was brought about by an undetectable agent with a particular identity.’ So to describe events as ‘natural’ is not to deny God’s action or involvement. It is rather a way of saying about some events: ‘Don’t wonder at them, don’t think of them as significant or extraordinary. They are perfectly ordinary, so don’t pay any particular attention to them’. So let us say that the statue of Mary drips water from the eyes, or the spots on a burned chapati resemble a bearded face like Jesus’. If we say ‘This was not some divine act but a natural event, not a miracle’, what are we saying? We are not saying that it was God’s will that the chapati not burn but the chapati defied God. According to Gareth (or Aquinas), we are also not saying that the natural world is independent of or irrelevant to God and so the statue of Mary escapes his control. We are saying ‘If the chapati burned, it must have been part of God’s will in some unimportant sense, but forget the chapati, it doesn’t mean anything. Don’t travel to see the statue. Focus on something that does have spiritual significance.’

On the other hand, to attribute an event to God’s intervention is to say, ‘“See this event as significant; don’t think of it as ordinary but as charged with meaning, and be impressed with it”’. This can even be true even when there is a plausible scientific explanation for something. Imagine that Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and humanists all over the world united in a 24-hour, ongoing prayer or meditation event for peace, day after day. Let us say that after that - no-one was struck by lightning, but all the major players seem to have been struck by good will and co-operation. The political structure of Iraq was transformed. US and UK forces went home alive and unhurt. The Iraqi people even got to keep their own oil and receive the profits from it to rebuild their infrastructure and re-stock their hospital pharmacies. ¾

Believers might want to say that this was God’s doing. But in saying that, they are not claiming that a violation of natural laws occurred. Rather, they are saying that, even if we can give a narrative in a future history book of what happened, still, there is something wondrous, or religious and spiritual significance in this event. Unlike a burned chapati or a statue with moist eyes, we should take heed of it.

Kathryn Tanner suggests that God’s and the creature’s activity take place on different planes (which Tanner distinguishes as ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’). God’s activity is to ground the creaturely sphere. Whatever we might want to say about action on that sphere—that Iraqi scientists freely choose not to talk to UN inspectors, or that they were forced or threatened—is not in conflict with God’s activity on the ‘vertical’ plane. Genuinely free human action exists, but it is still dependent on God for its existence. This dependence is total; one does not divide up an action into God’s and the creature’s contributions. God does not ‘work on’ us as we influence one another. God can, however, work in an interior way, in one’s depths, from within created causes, in a way that creatures cannot. So God’s agency can extend to self-initiated acts and decisions of ours.

Barry Miller agrees that God’s agency is simply not a more powerful version of human agency, but exists on a different logical plane altogether. Miller asserts that the relation between God’s and a creature’s activity is that God brings it about that the creature does it. This does not reduce creatures to being instruments rather than agents; for ‘God brings it about that (someone does something)’ does not imply ‘God brings someone to do something’ or ‘God makes someone do something’. Nor does this infringe the creature’s freedom.

To understand how this can be so, one must bear in mind the radical difference between the action of creatures and a Creator. Creatures must act on things; whereas the distinctive feature of the divine creative act is that it can produce its effects without acting on anything at all. Just as God does not create from something, but creates ex nihilo, so too God does not act on things but brings them about ex nihilo.

On this description of God’s action the direct effect of God’s causing has my causing built into it. ‘God brings about the situation in which I decide to make my lecture relevant to war on Iraq’ is how we should understand God’s activity; not ‘God makes me decide to change the lecture.’ Far from compromising my freedom and efficacy, expressed in this way, God’s causality includes my free action; God is the cause of the situation in which I choose and cause my activity.

So the difference between God’s and my causality is not that God’s is ‘greater’ or ‘more powerful’. The difference between God’s and creatures’ causality is absolute.

Now in Islam you find, almost more clearly, the same structuration of the problem. The Ash’arites, followers of al-Ashari, said there is no creator but ‘Allah. Not only human beings themselves, but also every one of their actions are created by God. Human beings do not have a choice, nor any power over their actions. Any power held by any creature would compromise the omnipotence of God.
The Mu'tazilites, whom we might describe in Western terms as the ‘liberal’ wing of Islamic theology, took exception to this account. To their mind, it may have preserved God’s omnipotence but at the price of ‘Allah’s justice. For it entails that God wills someone to do evil, then punishes him for it. So they believed in a kind of ‘delegation’ - tafwid - in which God creates us with power and intelligence and entrusts us with using them according to our own will, at our own risk, on our own responsibility. We have real independence and power from ‘Allah and ‘Allah does not influence us in a particular direction. ¾ You can see how, from the Ash’arite point of view, this creates an unacceptable picture of human beings having independence and therefore power over against God.

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides, writing in Arabic, suggested that God’s way of working indirectly was to influence our intellects. Maimonides had a highly intellectualised picture of our relations to God; it is through our intelligent souls that we unite with God, and in that quasi-mystical quasi-intellectual union, God influences us to do His will. Maimonides had a theological son, Abraham. Rabbi Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, interestingly, was powerfully influenced by the Islamic Sufi tradition and it suffuses his thinking¾ let no-one tell you that inter-faith dialogue is a newfangled invention, because this is happening in the twelfth century! In particular, this Sufi influence overtook his influence from his father on this very point – on divine action. Here, his father's picture of intellectual unity with God is nuanced. Theoretical knowledge and reflection is important, but is balanced by the need for a purification of heart and soul. The question of divine activity then becomes the place for special trust in God. Rabbi Abraham does not accept the rejection of God’s special activity in miracles; God can work in this way. But he also rejects omnideterminism or predestination, which deny to human beings and to nature their own agency. The real difference between the believer and the unbeliever, he suggests, is in their attitude to natural causes (the snow)¾the believer sees in these God also at work. Even whether a natural event can take place or a natural law take effect depends on God’s will that it do so.

Islamic theology of course developed its own complex and closely-reasoned middle way, between the predestination and omnideterminism of the Ash’arites, and the delegation view of the Mu’tazilites. We find this in particular in the early Shi’ite thinkers of Twelve-Imam Shi’ism. A hadith about Imam al-Sadiq (died 148/765), one of the great lights of Shi’ism, has a man tackle the Imam on this question. Imam al-Sadiq rejects the Ash ‘arite position, saying ‘Allah is more just than to make people commit misdeeds then chastise them for what they have done’. He also rejects the Mu ‘tazilite view: ‘If He had delegated it to them, He would have not confined them to enjoining good and forbidding evil.’ When the man asks if there is any possible station or position between these two viewpoints, the Imam exclaims, ‘Yes, wider than the space between heaven and earth!’ This quip is worth bearing in mind whenever anyone tries to force you into a choice between two extremes.

This ‘station between the stations’ or Muslim middle way argues that human beings have free will and possibility of action, for which they are responsible, precisely because they are created that way by God and maintained in existence and empowered to act in that way by God. In that way, human actions are their own, and are at the same time can be seen as actions of God, for there is no affair, no action, no authority but God’s, and every power comes from Him. Their position is essentially the one sought also by Moore, Miller and Tanner which we investigated earlier; in other words, the cousin or forerunner of the account later given by St Thomas Aquinas.

So on this view, can God intervene to stop a war? Yes. Why? Because we can. How? Through our action. But is that then also God’s action? Yes, because that is what he made us to be like, and keeps us being this way. What does the difference between God’s action and our action look like? Nothing at all.

In the Sufi tradition which so inspired Rabbi Abraham, son of Maimonides, there is a story that describes a man going through the world seeing evil, suffering, and horror ¾ crime, sickness, death, and war. Finally he rounds on God, demanding: ‘God, why did you not do something about it?!’ God replies: ‘I did do something about it. I made you.’