

CREATION, CONSERVATION, AND DIVINE ACTION

Related exam questions:

- If God continuously preserves things in being must God be regarded as cause of every single thing that happens? (2005/10)
- Can a non-bodily being create a physical world? Can an eternal being create a temporal world? (2002/2)

God is generally regarded as the creator of the world, but the rest of God's causal interactions with the world are fraught with philosophical difficulties. There are two big topics here: God's general relation to worldly causation and the problem of special divine action (divine intervention, miracles).

I. General divine action

There are three classic theories about God's general relation to worldly causation. According to occasionalism, no natural entity ever causes anything in the strict metaphysical sense; only God has causal efficacy as far as nature is concerned. Conservationism is the idea that God's activity after creation is confined to keeping things in existence. Concurrentism is the claim that natural entities do have causal powers but God also participates in their causal work to some extent. One's choice between these theories has obvious repercussions in less esoteric and rather important areas of the philosophy of religion, namely, in connection with the problem of evil as well as with free will. For example, one might worry that occasionalism (and perhaps concurrentism as well) makes God causally responsible for evil, and hence guarantees that God is not morally perfect. Here's a quick rejoinder to this from George Berkeley, a notorious occasionalist:

In answer to that, I observe, first, that the imputation of guilt is the same, whether a person commits an action with or without an instrument. In case therefore you suppose God to act by the mediation of an instrument or occasion, called *Matter*, you as truly make Him the author of sin as I, who think Him the immediate agent in all those operations vulgarly ascribed to Nature. I farther observe that sin or moral turpitude doth not consist in the outward physical action or motion, but in the internal deviation of the will from the laws of reason and religion. This is plain, in that the killing an enemy in a battle, or putting a criminal legally to death, is not thought sinful; though the outward act be the very same with that in the case of murder. Since, therefore, sin doth not consist in the physical action, the making God an immediate cause of all such actions is not making Him the Author of sin. Lastly, I have nowhere said that God is the only agent who produces all the motions in bodies. It is true I have denied there are any other agents besides spirits; but this is very consistent with allowing to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions. (Berkeley: *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, dialogue 3)

II. General divine action

The challenge of special divine action is the challenge to explain how divine intervention is compatible with the modern scientific worldview on which nature operates according to laws that give rise to exceptionless regularities. It seems that a theist who does not want to revise or repudiate our best science is forced to say that miracles cannot occur after all or that miracles are simply natural events that we perceive as very fortunate or important (miracles are only “subjectively” miraculous). This is the view of miracles echoed in the following Jewish anecdote:

A naturalist came from a great distance to see the Baal Shem [= Israel ben Eliezer, a mystical rabbi who lived in 18th century Poland] and said: "My investigations show that in the course of nature the Red Sea had to divide at the very hour the children of Israel passed through it. Now what about that famous miracle!" The Baal Shem answered: "Don't you know that God created nature? And he created it so, that at the hour the children of Israel passed through the Red Sea, it had to divide. This is the great and famous miracle!" (from Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*)

Although this account of providence is interesting and perhaps even compelling, many theists would like to leave room for a more traditional conception of (objective) miracles, that is, for the possibility of God's directly intervening in the natural world as God sees fit. But it is unclear how this idea can be squared with modern science.

Some relevant readings:

General divine action

Freddoso: "God's general concurrence with secondary causes"

Explains the three classic accounts of general divine action and argues for concurrentism.

McCann & Kvanvig: "The Occasionalist proselytizer"

A modern defense of occasionalism.

Freddoso: "Medieval Aristotelianism and the case against secondary causation in nature"

Reconstructs Berkeley's and others' arguments for occasionalism.

Quinn: "Divine conservation, secondary causes, and occasionalism"

Outlines a theory of creation and conservation on which God's creating and conserving something is identical to God's willing that it exist. This idea is combined with a contemporary theory of causation by the neo-Humean philosopher David Lewis to yield an account of divine action that can (allegedly) reconcile the idea of God as the sole source of causal power with the common-sense intuition that created beings can also cause things.

Mann: "God's freedom, human freedom, and God's responsibility for sin"

Argues that divine freedom differs from human freedom in that (i) God's willing something is identical to God's bringing it about, and (ii) every event whatsoever is the object of God's will. At the end, the paper argues that fact (ii) does not compromise moral perfection.

van Inwagen: "The place of chance in a world sustained by God"

Defends the idea that God can ordain the presence of chancy events or powers, the effects of which He cannot predict or influence.

Special divine action

Plantinga: "Divine action in the world" (chs.3 and 4 of his *Science and Religion: Where the Conflict Really Lies*)

Plantinga's summary of the alleged conflict between modern science and the idea of divine intervention. He argues that the hypothesis of conflict only makes sense in the context of pre-20th century, deterministic physics and the "conflict" disappears in the context of modern quantum mechanics.

Russell: "Quantum physics and the theology of non-interventionist objective divine action"

The point is a bit similar to Plantinga's, but it is developed in more detail. Russell claims that quantum mechanics, which seems to imply that our world is objectively indeterministic, leaves plenty of room for divine action, including possible interventions into the course of evolution.