

APPENDIX E

DIVINE DETERMINISM AND FATALISM

A common response to the doctrine of divine determinism among modern Christians is that divine determinism leads to fatalism. By that, they could mean one of two things: (i) divine determinism logically entails fatalism, or (ii) divine determinism results in a fatalistic frame of mind in the one who embraces it as a doctrine. I will consider each of these claims.

(i) ‘Fatalism,’ in the sense in which I mean it here (and that is the sense that the average person gives to the term), describes the view that whatever is going to happen is going to happen, *no matter what*. Whatever is fated to happen is indeed going to happen and nothing whatsoever can prevent it. The suggestion under consideration is that fatalism (so defined) is the logical consequence of the doctrine of divine determinism.

Clearly this is not true. Nothing in the doctrine of divine determinism suggests that if God has willed for X to occur, X will occur *no matter what*. On the contrary, in willing X to occur, God is also willing all of the ordinary causes of X as well. So, for example, if God wills that I murder person P out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy, then God must not only determine my act of murdering P, he must also determine my intense jealousy and murderous rage. Fatalism, as vaguely understood by the average person, would suggest that if God wills that I murder person P out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy, then it makes no difference whether I take steps to successfully avoid the intense jealousy and the murderous rage. I will murder P anyway. This is clearly not what divine determinism implies. If, in fact, steps could be taken whereby I could successfully avoid the intense jealousy and the murderous rage, then my act of murdering person P out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy could indeed be prevented. (In fact, even if I did end up murdering P, it would not have been out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy. Hence, it would not have been what God had willed.) Divine determinism does not entail that what God wills to happen will happen *no matter what*. Rather, it entails that all that God wills to happen will happen, including the entire nexus of preconditions and causes that give rise to what he wills to happen. So, if God wills for me to murder person P out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy, then it is necessarily the case that I will develop an intense jealousy, that it will develop into a murderous rage, that I will have no desire to take steps to prevent

the jealousy and rage, that I will freely and willfully choose to be jealous and murderous, and that nothing anyone does or says to me will be effective in inducing me to repent of my jealousy or rage. But it does not follow from this that *no matter what might happen* I will do what God has determined that I will do. It makes all the difference in the world what might happen!! If someone did say something to me that induced me to repent of my jealousy and rage, then, of necessity, I would not and could not go on to murder person P out of a murderous rage induced by intense jealousy. So it very much matters whether or not someone successfully induces me to repent. I will only do what God has willed that I do on the condition that I end up not repenting of my jealousy and rage. But there is a real and consequential choice before me. If I repent of my jealousy and rage, I will not murder P. If I do not repent of my jealousy and rage, I will murder P. The stakes are high. The consequences of my choice are great. Divine determinism does nothing to undermine the consequential nature of the choice before me. But while it does not alter the consequential nature of the choice I face, it does predict what my choice will be. If God has so determined, I will choose not to repent. Or, at least, I will not choose to repent.

Fatalism is a very different viewpoint. If fatalism—as popularly understood—were true, then my choices would be completely inconsequential. If I am going to murder P *no matter what*, then it makes no difference whether I repent of my jealousy and rage or not. What is going to happen is going to happen no matter what I do and choose. Clearly, this is not what divine determinism maintains. Hence, divine determinism is not fatalism. According to divine determinism, it makes all the difference in the world what I choose and what I do. It is just that what I do and what I choose, down to the minutest detail, is ultimately determined by the divine author of my being.

(ii) A ‘fatalistic frame of mind,’ in the sense in which I employ the phrase here, is the frame of mind a person can adopt wherein he is unmotivated to take any steps to affect the outcome of his life in any way. The source of the lack of motivation is his belief that it makes no difference what steps he might take. The outcome will be the same no matter what.

We have already seen that divine determinism does not logically entail the belief that it makes no difference what steps I take, that the outcome will be the same no matter what. But while it may not logically entail such a belief, does it, as a matter of course, lead to a fatalistic frame of mind nonetheless?

There is no evidence that it does. Granted, one can find individuals who, at some stage of their lives, have been inclined toward a fatalistic

frame of mind. Such individuals may, in fact, consider divine determinism a convenient way to justify their fatalistic frame of mind. But three things need to be noted about such individuals: (a) Typically, this is a fleeting and temporary condition. One would be hard pressed to find an individual who persists in a fatalistic frame of mind out of a settled conviction and a permanent frame of mind. (b) Typically, such individuals have a superficial, inadequate, and distorted understanding of the doctrine of divine determinism. They are typically confused and mistaken about the valid implications of their belief. (This should not be surprising. Divine determinism and the issues that surround it are among the more intellectually challenging issues a human being can ever face.) (c) When the real source of the fatalistic frame of mind becomes clear, it is typically not the person's belief in the doctrine of divine determinism. It is typically something else. Usually it involves a strategy for dealing with moral failings. If I can believe that nothing I do affects the outcome of my life, then I need not take real responsibility for the moral failings in my life, for there is nothing I can do about it. This can be an attractive strategy for dealing with the guilt of moral failure. In such a case, divine determinism—or, more accurately, a superficial and distorted understanding of divine determinism—becomes a convenient basis for rationalizing one's fatalistic frame of mind by casting it in a form that seems intellectually respectable. But, in such a scenario, it is not my belief in divine determinism that has led to my fatalistic frame of mind. It is my strategy for coping with guilt due to moral failings. A bastardized form of the doctrine of divine determinism has served only as a convenient means to rationalize my fatalism.

Divine determinism, correctly understood, does not logically entail fatalism, nor does it lead, psychologically, to a fatalistic frame of mind. These cannot, therefore, be legitimately offered up as reasons to reject divine determinism.

In light of the above discussion, it is highly unfortunate that much of the philosophical literature discussing the issues would denominate my position as THEOLOGICAL FATALISM. To give them the benefit of the doubt, these philosophers would probably define theological fatalism in such a way that it means just what I mean by 'divine determinism'. But to label this position as they do is highly misleading and ultimately tendentious. Divine determinism is significantly different from fatalism as the latter term is popularly and typically understood. Accordingly, it does not serve the interests of clear communication to invite a confusion of these two radically different points of view. This is one of the reasons that I have chosen the label 'divine determinism' over 'theological fatalism' even though the latter is the more conventional term among those religious philosophers who discuss this topic.