

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

# THE ETHICAL OBJECTION TO DIVINE DETERMINISM

### THE ETHICAL OBJECTION

*If divine determinism is true, then it is futile for men to strive to be good. God will accomplish his will regardless. But this is contrary to fact. We know that it is not futile for men to strive to be good. (It is a fundamentally commonsensical assumption that striving to be good is a prerequisite to good choices and actions.) Hence, divine determinism cannot be true.*

In the final analysis, the ethical objection is an objection to what is perceived to be the inevitable practical result of believing in divine determinism. To believe in divine determinism, it is argued, must inevitably result in moral laxity or passivity.

If everything I do is ultimately decided by God, then what is the point of diligently striving after moral goodness? If God wants me to be good, then I will. If he doesn't, I won't. And nothing I do can change it. So, why try? Such is the practical attitude that must necessarily result from a belief in divine determinism.

But the truth is that we are all under obligation to diligently pursue moral goodness. We will attain to moral goodness only by striving after it. Therefore, the practical implication of divine determinism—namely, that moral diligence is pointless—is directly contrary to the truth. Now if a theory or worldview has implications that are not true, one is forced to assume that the theory itself is not true. Therefore, divine determinism is untenable as a worldview. In truth, we are morally obligated to strive for goodness. Yet divine determinism entails moral indifference and passivity. Divine determinism, therefore, is wrong.

This third objection to divine determinism combines elements of the previous two. It is somewhat philosophical in nature, but it is also somewhat theological in nature. Specifically, it is ethical in nature. Like the philosophical objection, it is really only an objection to extending divine determinism so far as to include the freewill choices of men. And like the theological objection, it is only a forceful objection to those who hold a particular worldview—specifically, the Judaeo-Christian worldview. It is only forceful against those who recognize moral laxity to be in contradic-

tion to what is true.

The ethical objection is more of an intuitive gut reaction than it is an argument. It is rarely spelled out rigorously by the objectors. Therefore, to answer it, I must try to translate the intuition behind it into a more systematic form that can then be analyzed.

It seems to me that this objection actually takes two different forms. First, it can exist as a reasoned argument against divine determinism. This objection attempts to argue that moral laxity is the logically necessary implication of divine determinism. (I will refer to this form of the argument as the FORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION.) Secondly, it can exist as a utilitarian argument against divine determinism. This objection, while acknowledging that moral laxity may not be logically required by divine determinism, insists that moral laxity is psychologically inevitable nonetheless. And, assuming this, it argues for rejecting divine determinism on the basis of its inevitable negative effects. (I will refer to this form of the argument as the INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION.)

## The Formal Ethical Objection

Let us examine the formal objection in the form of a relatively rigorous argument. The argument would go something like this:

**STEP 1:** *If divine determinism is true, then God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever good thing I do and God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever evil thing I do.*

This follows directly from the definition of divine determinism as we have defined it in this work.

**STEP 2:** *If divine determinism is true, then God's will is irresistible; whatever he wills comes to be.*

This too follows directly from the definition of divine determinism as we have defined it in this work.

**STEP 3:** *If God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever I choose to do, then I will necessarily do whatever good thing God wills me to do and I will necessarily do whatever evil thing God wills me to do.*

This follows directly from step 2 and from the concept of causation as it is defined in this work with respect to divine determinism.

**STEP 4:** *If divine determinism is true, there exist absolutely no realities that could prevent me from doing whatever good thing God wills me to do nor whatever evil thing God wills me to do.*

According to step 1, if divine determinism is true then God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever I do—whether good or evil. According to step 3, if God is the cause of my choosing to do a good (or an evil) thing, then I will necessarily do whatever good (or evil) thing God wills me to do. It follows from steps 1 and 3 that if divine determinism is true, then I will necessarily do whatever good (or evil) thing God wills me to do. It follows directly from this—by the very nature of necessity—that if divine determinism is true, then there can exist absolutely no realities that could prevent me from doing whatever good (or evil) God wills me to do.

**STEP 5:** *If divine determinism is true, my own lack of desire and volition to do some particular good that God wills me to do could not prevent me from doing it, and neither could my own lack of desire and volition to do some particular evil that God wills me to do prevent me from doing that.*

This follows directly as a specific instance of the conclusion reached in step 4 above.

**STEP 6:** *If divine determinism is true, to strive to attain to a desire and volition to do good things is futile with respect to the ability to actually do them.*

This follows directly from step 5. If God, apart from desire and volition in me, is the cause of the good things that I actually do, then striving to have a desire and volition to do good is an irrelevant and unproductive enterprise. It cannot result in my doing any good deeds except and unless God wills them. And if God *does* will that I do them, then I necessarily will do them whether I have striven to have a desire and volition to do them or not.

**STEP 7:** *If divine determinism is true, then to strive to have a desire and volition to do good things is pointless and futile.*

This follows directly from step 6.

**STEP 8:** *If to strive to have a desire and volition to do good things is not pointless and futile, then divine determinism is not true.*

This follows directly from step 7. The contrapositive<sup>186</sup> of a true statement is necessarily true. Step 8 is the contrapositive of step 7.

Since our argument has concluded that step 7 is true, it follows directly that step 8, its contrapositive, is true.

**STEP 9:** *If what the Bible teaches about morality is true, then to strive to have a desire and volition to do good things is not pointless and futile.*

This follows from an inductive study of the Bible's teaching. Explicitly and implicitly, in a number of ways, the biblical perspective is that to strive after goodness—that is, to seek to desire it—is one of the defining features of what it means to be a truly authentic human being in the light of who God created us to be. It is assumed throughout that those who do good are those who have desired goodness and willed it for themselves. Furthermore, the biblical perspective is that to do so—to strive after goodness—will be rewarded with success. (“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”-Matthew 5:6)

**STEP 10:** *If what the Bible teaches about morality is true, then divine determinism is not true.*

This follows directly from step 8 and step 9 above.

**STEP 11:** *What the Bible teaches about morality is true.*

This is a premise that is foundational to the Christian believer's faith.

The Christian believes that it is rationally defensible and grounded in sound reason.

**STEP 12:** *Therefore, divine determinism is not true.*

This follows immediately from step 10 and step 11 above.

---

186. The contrapositive of a statement of the form “If A, then B” is “If not B, then not A.” It is axiomatic in formal logic that the contrapositive of a true statement is necessarily true.

## Answering the Formal Ethical Objection

### YAHWEH-THE-JUDGE OR YAHWEH-THE-TRANSCENDENT

To analyze the Formal Ethical Argument, we must draw a crucial distinction between two very different relationships that God sustains with respect to created reality. At particular moments in human history the transcendent creator God has taken up specific roles within the drama of history and has revealed himself to certain people—most notably the Jewish people—and has promised to sustain a particular relationship with them.

God told Moses to call him Yahweh.<sup>187</sup> Yahweh wanted to be the God of Israel, and he wanted Israel to be his people. As such, he promised to sustain a relationship with Israel where he would serve as law-giver and judge, on the one hand, and as the one who would bless them, protect them, prosper them, and sustain them on the other. In exchange, he asked of Israel that they obey and honor him by keeping his law. Yahweh, the maker of this covenant with Israel, presents himself as a being in a covenant-relationship to Israel. He will make a law that he wants Israel to keep. Then he will wait to see what Israel will do—pleading with them to obey him and warning them that he will judge them with destruction if they do not. Now, why would a God who, according to the thesis of this book, is in absolute control over every aspect of his creation have to plead with and warn Israel? Could he not simply “author” their obedience? How do we reconcile Yahweh the covenant-maker with the transcendent creator God we are seeking to understand in this work?

In sorting out the biblical evidence, we must make a distinction between who Yahweh ultimately is—the transcendent author of all reality—and who Yahweh presents himself to be in relationship to human beings—the one who desires a covenant relationship with his people. When Yahweh makes a covenant with Israel, pleads with Israel, exhorts her, woos her, and ultimately judges her, God is presenting himself to Israel only in a limited role: as a law-giver and covenant-maker. He clearly is not revealing himself in the fullness of who he is. On the other hand, when he predicts Israel’s future restoration and obedience and when he declares that God’s promises are going to come to pass regardless of the

---

187. In my judgment, *Yahweh* is best understood to mean “HE WHO IS”.

stubbornness of the nation's heart, Yahweh's transcendent authorship of the whole of history is clearly being manifest. So, while Yahweh is the transcendent author of all of history and of all reality, he sometimes presents himself to mankind in a more limited role: as their covenant-maker, law-giver, and judge. In the remainder of this work, when I refer to God as he ultimately is in his fullness, I will call him Yahweh-the-Transcendent. When I refer to the more limited role in which God often discloses himself to men within the unfolding drama of history, I will call him Yahweh-the-Judge.

Yahweh-the-Judge is the king and judge of all the earth. Yahweh-the-Judge sits exalted in the heavens. All power and all might is in his hands. Yahweh-the-Judge is sovereign.<sup>188</sup> Yahweh-the-Judge is magnificent. Yahweh-the-Judge is all-powerful. But he is not being conceived as transcendent. Rather, Yahweh-the-Judge is God revealing himself within a particular role within this reality. He is the sovereign God who must be worshipped. He is the judge before whom every creature must stand and give account. He is the mighty savior who can either save or destroy. He is a force to be reckoned with within our reality. But he is not being conceived as a transcendent reality. He is being conceived as an actor within the drama of cosmic history and not as the author of cosmic history itself.

And yet Yahweh-the-Judge is one and the same with the transcendent creator God who exists above and beyond all of reality. Yahweh-the-Judge is ultimately Yahweh-the-Transcendent. Yahweh-the-Judge is a particular manner in which Yahweh-the-Transcendent has manifested himself within reality. Yahweh-the-Judge is Yahweh-the-Transcendent having presented himself as a character within the drama of history. Yahweh-the-Transcendent, the author of all reality, revealed himself by writing himself into the script as Yahweh-the-Judge, the Lord and God of Israel and of all mankind. Yahweh-the-Judge, and he alone, is Yahweh-the-Transcendent.<sup>189</sup> Now it is important to note: in presenting himself to us as Yahweh-the-Judge, he never ceased to function as Yahweh-the-Transcendent. (The very idea is absurd.) Yahweh-the-Transcendent simply

---

188. See my discussion of the meaning of 'sovereign' in chapter 4.

189. This, of course, was the point God (Yahweh-the-Judge) kept stressing to Israel. He, Yahweh-the-Judge—not the Baalim of the Caanites, nor Molech, nor any other so-called god—was the true God. In other words, no other so-called god was the unique God who was identical to Yahweh-the-Transcendent. Alongside Yahweh-the-Judge's claim to be the one true God, Yahweh-the-Transcendent, no heathen god of the surrounding nations could make any legitimate claim to be a god at all.

190. I am not suggesting Yahweh-the-Judge had a body. Clearly he did not. He "embodied" himself only in a manner of speaking.

“embodied” himself in the role of a character in the drama that he was (and is) transcendentally creating.<sup>190</sup> Yahweh-the-Judge is a revelation of Yahweh-the-Transcendent. He is only a *partial* revelation of Yahweh-the-Transcendent, but he is a revelation nonetheless.

The above distinction is very important. The failure to make it misleads us into thinking that the ethical objection to divine determinism is plausible. As Yahweh-the-Transcendent, God does not (by definition) function as an ordinary cause within reality. He is the transcendent cause.<sup>191</sup> But as Yahweh-the-Judge, he presents himself as an agent acting in history as an ordinary cause. Throughout human history he has so presented himself. Most notably, when Yahweh-the-Judge commands mankind to “be holy as I am holy,” he is doing so as an ordinary cause. As Yahweh-the-Judge he presents himself as seeking to motivate, move, and influence through the ordinary process of pleading, warning, exhorting, and persuading. He cannot change our behavior. We must choose to change our own behavior. He cannot make us righteous. He can only plead with us to be righteous. He cannot make us be his people. He can only promise us certain blessings if we choose to be so. In this way, Yahweh-the-Judge presents himself in a specific role where he serves as an ordinary cause of human behavior, not as its transcendent cause.

## GOD AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

For the sake of our discussion of the Formal Ethical Objection to divine determinism, the relationship between God and righteousness<sup>192</sup> is crucial. Is God the cause of my good deeds on the one hand and of my evil deeds on the other? This is the claim made in step 1 of the Formal Ethical Objection.

Whether the claim is true depends upon whether we are referring to God as Yahweh-the-Judge or as Yahweh-the-Transcendent. It makes all the difference whether we mean God, the transcendent cause of human choice, or God insofar as he presents himself as the ordinary cause of human choice.

Yahweh-the-Judge made a covenant with Israel. His desire becomes quite clear in the context of that covenant. Yahweh-the-Judge desired that

---

191. See chapter 9 for a discussion of the distinction between an ordinary cause and a transcendent cause.

192. By ‘righteousness’ I mean a quality of life and behavior that manifests itself in deeds of goodness. I use ‘righteousness’ as a synonym for godliness, god-likeness, and goodness.

his people be holy as he is holy. Righteous living is the will of Yahweh-the-Judge. Indeed, not only did he desire it, but he made it clear that his people (and by implication, all people) were under obligation to be righteous. He would judge them accordingly. Everything God did in relation to Israel is, to some degree, calculated to persuade them to pursue righteousness.

But for as much as Yahweh-the-Judge wanted his people to be righteous, and for all the warning, pleading, exhorting, persuading, and motivating that he did to try to bring it about, he did not get what he wanted. The history of Yahweh-the-Judge's dealings with the Jews is a story of his frustration. Israel remained contrary. Their "hardness of heart" controlled the result. Yahweh-the-Judge's exhortations, threats, and promises were without positive result. They were ineffectual in the face of the willful sinfulness of man.

Why? Why could Yahweh-the-Judge not succeed in making Israel obey him? Did he lack power? Is Yahweh-the-Judge simply outgunned by the power of evil? Is God too weak to bring his will to pass? Is he simply no match for the sinfulness of mankind? That is most certainly not the perspective of the Bible. Yahweh-the-Judge's lack of power is not a problem. He had more than ample power. The problem lay in the will of Yahweh-the-Judge. Yahweh-the-Judge did not desire coerced holiness, but genuine holiness. He wanted holiness that would result from the free choice of his people, not from his own coercive power.

Yahweh-the-Judge, unlike Yahweh-the-Transcendent, did not have the option of causing Israel to be holy without coercing them. Yahweh-the-Judge, by virtue of the nature of his role, could function only as an ordinary cause with respect to the choices and actions of human beings. He does not function as the transcendent cause behind reality. Even as Yahweh-the-Judge, he could have caused Israel's obedience. He could have caused it irresistibly. But he would have done so only at the cost of nullifying the free will of each Israelite. The Israelite would have obeyed out of free will only if the final, determinative, ordinary cause of his obedience lay within his own heart and mind. If, instead, the final, determinative, ordinary cause of an Israelite's obedience lay within the power of God, then his choice would not have been a freewill choice. What allowed human sinfulness the upper-hand is Yahweh-the-Judge's unwillingness to nullify free will by using his great power coercively.

The implications of this are important. Yahweh-the-Judge has no intention of being the ordinary cause of human choice. Yahweh-the-Judge is not the ordinary cause of either good or evil deeds. He declines to be; he desires not to negate free will. Therefore, in response to the



question we raised earlier, the answer is “no.” God (insofar as we are talking about Yahweh-the-Judge) is not the cause of my good deeds on the one hand and my evil ones on the other.

But if we are talking about God as Yahweh-the-Transcendent, things are different. As the author and transcendent cause of literally everything that transpires in reality, Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the transcendent cause of every choice of man. Every good deed performed by man is caused (transcendently) by Yahweh-the-Transcendent, and every evil deed is likewise (transcendently) caused by him. He is, in a meaningful sense, the cause of both the good deeds and the evil deeds of all of mankind. Therefore, responding once again to the question we raised earlier, the answer is now “yes.” God (insofar as we are talking about Yahweh-the-Transcendent) is most certainly the cause of my good deeds on the one hand and my evil ones on the other. But we must remain clear as to exactly in what sense this is true. *Yahweh-the-Transcendent is legitimately viewed as the transcendent cause of every human deed. But he is in no sense the ordinary cause of any of them.*

## STEP-BY-STEP ANALYSIS

Keeping in mind the distinction between Yahweh-the-Transcendent and Yahweh-the-Judge and all the ramifications of such a distinction, it becomes apparent that the Formal Ethical Objection suffers from ambiguity from the outset:

### ANALYSIS OF STEP 1

**STEP 1:** *If divine determinism is true, then God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever good thing I do and God is the cause of my choosing to do whatever evil thing I do.*

Who is God in this premise? Is it Yahweh-the-Transcendent or Yahweh-the-Judge? And further, in what sense is this step asserting that God is the cause of my choices? Is it asserting that God is their *ordinary* cause, or their *transcendent* cause? The truth or falsity of this premise hinges on exactly which is being claimed.

Divine determinism clearly does maintain that Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the transcendent cause of every choice I make, both good and evil. But in no way does it suggest that he is the ordinary cause of

these choices. Furthermore, so far as what divine determinism maintains, Yahweh-the-Judge is the cause of human choice in no sense whatsoever. He is neither its transcendent cause nor its ordinary cause. Yahweh-the-Judge seeks to influence and persuade, but he does not cause, determine, or necessitate any human choice. Man is free to obey him or disobey.

Step 1 is true, therefore, only under this one specific interpretation:

**STEP 1A:** *If divine determinism is true, then Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the transcendent cause of my choosing to do whatever good thing I do and Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the transcendent cause of my choosing to do whatever evil thing I do.*

## ANALYSIS OF STEP 2

In step 2 of the Formal Ethical Objection we are faced with exactly the same situation. The will of Yahweh-the-Transcendent is irresistible. But Yahweh-the-Judge's will is clearly *not* irresistible. We have already seen that Yahweh-the-Judge refused to coerce obedience from his people, Israel, and they did, in fact, resist him. Step 2 is true if and only if it reads:

**STEP 2A:** *If divine determinism is true, then Yahweh-the-Transcendent's will is irresistible; whatever he wills comes to be.*

God's will is irresistible because a transcendent cause does, by the very nature of transcendent causation, have irresistible control over his creations. But we will be tragically misled by this premise if we conceive of God's will as an invincible ordinary cause. God's will is not irresistible because he is stronger and more powerful than any other ordinary cause within reality. Rather, his will is irresistible because he is the creator of reality. What further inferences we draw from this premise will differ greatly depending upon which understanding we have of it. Conceiving of God as the most powerful and, therefore, the determinative ordinary cause is a false premise and will lead us to false conclusions. Only under the conception of God as the transcendent cause and creator of all of reality is this premise true.

## ANALYSIS OF STEP 3

Step 3 does, indeed, follow directly from step 2. But only if both are understood in the same vein—namely, it is Yahweh-the-Transcendent, not

Yahweh-the-Judge, who must be in view in order for each of these steps to be valid. So we have:

**STEP 3A:** *If Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the cause of my choosing to do whatever I choose to do, then I will necessarily do whatever good thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do and I will necessarily do whatever evil thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do.*

To understand step 3 with reference to Yahweh-the-Judge would be totally invalid. From step 2, which had Yahweh-the-Transcendent in view, it would be utterly fallacious to infer something about Yahweh-the-Judge. Furthermore, as we have already seen, the condition “If Yahweh-the-Judge is the cause of my choosing to do a good or evil act” will never be fulfilled (in contradistinction to the condition “If Yahweh-the-Transcendent is the cause of my choosing to do a good or evil act”). Yahweh-the-Judge is never in any sense the cause of any of our choices.

#### ANALYSIS OF STEP 4

This inference does follow directly from steps 1 and 3, if indeed we have Yahweh-the-Transcendent and not Yahweh-the-Judge in view. Hence, we have:

**STEP 4A:** *If divine determinism is true, there exist absolutely no realities that could prevent me from doing whatever good thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do nor whatever evil thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do.*

But, to avoid being misled, this inference needs to be more precisely stated. There is a significant logical jump from step 3a to step 4a—a jump from “...then I will necessarily do whatever good or evil thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do” to “...there exist absolutely no realities that could prevent me from doing whatever good or evil thing Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do.” This is a complex deduction that is not, and should not be, directly apparent. It is basically sound, I think. But while the deduction is basically sound, it is so only when the conclusion is rightly understood. We must take great care to understand what is and is not being asserted by this conclusion.

The intuition behind this inference is very simple: As the transcendent creator God, no created thing is capable of thwarting Yahweh-the-

Transcendent in his effort to make creation what he wills it to be. That is exactly at the heart of what divine determinism affirms. Hence, no divine determinist will quarrel with this. But does it follow from this that “*no* realities could prevent ... (what) Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills....”? No! It does not follow. Let me explain.

One very important thing *could* prevent what God wills—namely, a contradictory or rationally inconsistent reality. Granted, no such reality can, in actuality, thwart God’s will, for God, the creator, would simply not allow such a reality to exist. But were God—contrary to his own will—to bring such a reality into existence, it would indeed prevent God from accomplishing his will.

We have been arguing in this book that, to have a biblically consistent worldview, one must embrace what I have called divine determinism. It can likewise be said that, to have a biblically consistent worldview, one must uphold both the rationality of God and the rationality of the created order.<sup>193</sup> According to the Bible, God is a rational being (indeed, he is the very source of reason and intelligence) who has created and continues to create everything in accordance with a unifying rational structure or pattern. This rational order to reality is what makes reality knowable to intelligent beings. Were there no patterns within reality that were discernible to human rationality, then no real knowledge would be possible.

From the biblical perspective, it is not arbitrary that God creates in accordance with a rational order. It is required by the very nature and character of his being. God is a “rationality freak” who requires that reality be rationally orderly. For God to tolerate rational incoherence is no more possible than for him to tolerate evil. Just as God’s holiness precludes the possibility of his doing evil, his rationality precludes the possibility of his doing anything illogical, rationally inconsistent, or intellectually chaotic.<sup>194</sup>

As discussed in chapter 3, the rational patterns that dictate God’s creative activity are, at least in part, discernible to us. The recognition of these patterns is a major part of what we call knowledge. Science is the discovery of those patterns that exist in physical reality. One of the fundamental rational patterns—apparent to both common sense and scientific

---

193. See my earlier discussion of this in chapter 3.

194. I hope that what I am saying here is clear enough in light of my discussion in chapter 3. God can certainly do things that seem irrational and that appear to be rationally inconsistent from the standpoint of our limited perspective. My point has to do with the ultimate nature of things. God will not and cannot do anything that is ultimately irrational and ultimately inconsistent in the larger scheme of things.

ic investigation—is the pattern of cause and effect. Every event within reality has an ordinary cause that brought it about.<sup>195</sup> It is part of the created order—part of the rational pattern that God follows in creating history—that whenever he creates an event, he also creates other antecedent realities from which that event follows out of rational necessity. We recognize these antecedent realities as the ordinary cause or causes of that event. God—in creating the flow of history—is bound by the pattern of cause and effect just as surely as he is bound by goodness. It is part of the rational order of created reality that he, by his very nature, is committed to.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, God cannot cause (transcendently) something to happen in reality without also causing (transcendently) its rationally appropriate ordinary causes as well.<sup>197</sup>

This brings us back to the point under discussion. Are there any realities that could prevent God (Yahweh-the-Transcendent) from accom-

---

195. Actually, whether every event has an ordinary cause is problematic. For example, I am inclined to think that human volition has *no* ordinary cause. It is this fact that explains why we typically tend to view human volition as “uncaused” or “self-caused,” notions that, strictly speaking, are absurd. What our common sense is seeking to come to terms with in the typical view is that human volition has a transcendent cause but no ordinary cause. Or, at least, that its ordinary cause (namely, “the will”) is simply an epiphenomenon of its transcendent cause. The free volition of free moral agents stands alone, I believe, as a reality independent of but contributing to the chain of cause and effect. It is unique in having no ordinary cause. But causation is a very complicated concept that is worthy of much more rigorous analysis than I can give it here in this book. For the purposes of this book, I will ignore these more complex issues. The outcome of any further investigation of these matters would not, I am confident, affect the points I am making here in this argument in any way. Throughout the rest of this chapter I will speak of the human will as the “ordinary cause” of one’s volitional choices. While this may not be strictly accurate, it is true enough for our purposes. It is particularly important to distinguish the ordinary cause of my volition from its transcendent cause. To do so, we must locate the ordinary cause of my volition within the workings of my own will. But in speaking in such a way, I do not discount the very likely possibility that, in fact, my volition has no ordinary cause at all.

196. There is an important difference between God’s commitment to goodness and God’s commitment to cause and effect. God is committed to cause and effect in this reality we live in, but it is logically possible for God to have created a reality without cause and effect. In another reality—an entirely different created order—God may not have been committed to cause and effect. But in ANY reality he created, God would be committed to goodness. The parallel to goodness, then, is not cause and effect (that is, the specific rational order we find in our world); rather it is rationality itself. Like goodness, any reality God created would find God committed to the rational coherence and consistency of that reality. God is as incurably rational as he is incurably good.

197. The reader who is familiar with medieval philosophy and theology will recognize that I am describing the distinction that the medievals made between God as the primary cause of some aspect of reality and the secondary causes of that same aspect of reality. While the medievals knew that God was the creator of all reality and everything in it, they recognized that he often (if not always) worked through secondary causes to make occur what he willed to occur. Their

plishing his will? “Yes,” and then again, “No.” “Yes” in the sense that, if God were to create a set of circumstances that rationally required a particular effect, then God—by his own rationality—is under obligation to create that effect as well. God is thereby “thwarted,” in a sense, from creating the absence of that rationally required effect. But “No” in the sense that, if God has created a set of circumstances that rationally require a particular effect, nothing whatsoever (other than God’s own will) could stop God from simply changing the circumstances (through his power as transcendent author) until what is rationally required is the absence of the effect rather than its presence.

Let’s look at an example. Suppose God (Yahweh-the-Transcendent) caused (transcendently) an apple to become detached from its stem. The event that is rationally required (in the light of the rational structure of the divinely created order and a host of unstated assumptions<sup>198</sup>) is for the apple to bonk Sir Isaac Newton on the head. Now, if God—out of deference to Sir Isaac’s head—willed to prevent him from being hit, could that be accomplished? “Yes,” and “No.”

“Yes,” insofar as God is quite capable of creating other realities that would render it no longer rationally required that the apple bonk Newton on the head. For example, God could create in Newton the desire to do a handstand at just the right moment—thereby altering what is rationally required. Now, the apple must either miss him entirely or hit him on the feet. Or, God could cause a tremendous gust of wind to blow the apple to the side. Then—by rational requirement—it must miss Newton’s head.

In another sense, however, we must answer “No.” If God’s will were to prevent Sir Isaac from being hit by the apple, there is a set of realities that could prevent God (Yahweh-the-Transcendent) from accomplishing his will. Specifically, for God to cause the apple to become detached from the tree, to have all other aspects of reality stay unchanged, and to still

---

concept of a secondary cause parallels in important ways my concept of an ordinary cause.

198. The host of unstated assumptions would include things like: there is a man Sir Isaac Newton; he is sitting under an apple tree; he is located directly beneath the apple that is about to become detached from its stem; etc.

199. But this raises an interesting question. Could God have the apple fall to within 6 inches of Sir Isaac’s head and then stop there, suspended in mid-air? Would it be irrational of God to do that? It clearly would not be irrational if he used secondary causes to accomplish it. Some unknown force field that effectively canceled out the force of gravity and brought the apple to rest, for example. But could God create this effect *ex nihilo*, without employing secondary causes, and still have it be a rational event? While this is a difficult question, I am inclined to think that he could. If he were to attribute the effect to himself insofar as he has revealed himself as Yahweh-the-Judge who has a role in the course of cosmic events, then the effect would have an ordinary cause. The ordinary cause would be the power of Yahweh-the-Judge, the God most

have Newton go unbonked is not possible. Under this set of circumstances, it would be irrational for God to create the event such that Newton—in defiance of the laws of physics—was not hit by the apple.<sup>199</sup>

Now let us consider the claims in step 4a directly. Could God cause me to do a good thing (in accordance with his will) and create the simultaneous realities that (i) I do not want, in any sense, to do that good thing, (ii) I do not choose to do that good thing, and (iii) I am not being physically coerced to do that good thing? No! To do so would be to violate the rational structure of the created order—specifically, it would be to violate the rational structure of the psychology of human choosing. Accordingly, this is something God would be unable, by his very nature, to do. Realities (i), (ii), and (iii) rationally require that I not do the good thing that God wants me to do. For God to transcendently cause me to do that good thing anyway—without replacing realities (i), (ii), and (iii) with a new set of realities—would be something God is incapable of doing. In the language of step 4, realities (i), (ii), and (iii) would “prevent me from doing the good thing that God willed me to do.” Only by transforming the present realities can God cause me (transcendently) to do the good thing he wills me to do.

As is perhaps clear already, two things contribute to the logical confusion that results in the deduction in step 4 of the original version of the Ethical Objection:

### **First Source of Confusion**

The reasoning in step 4 fails to reckon with the fact that God has boundaries.<sup>200</sup> There are limits on what Yahweh-the-Transcendent, the transcendent cause, will and will not—and indeed, can and cannot—do. God’s own nature, character, and purposes establish boundaries that he cannot cross. Failing to notice this creates the illusion that nothing in created reality would or could be incompatible with anything else in created reality. In the light of this illusion, step 4 can be misconstrued to suggest

---

high. This would render the event entirely rational. The effect would be utterly explicable. We once again see the import of distinguishing between Yahweh-the-Transcendent and Yahweh-the-Judge. Some people are reluctant to attribute the miraculous signs that God performed to any secondary causes at all. They feel that to attribute them to anything other than the raw power of Yahweh-the-Judge as their ordinary cause is to diminish their significance as a sign and wonder. This makes no sense to me. Whether Yahweh-the-Judge uses other secondary means to demonstrate his power or whether he uses his raw, unmediated power makes no difference to the significance of the sign—namely, they reveal that Yahweh-the-Judge has absolute control over the whole of reality and, therefore, deserves to be heeded and acknowledged.

that there is nothing incoherent about a person doing a good deed while neither desiring nor choosing nor being physically coerced to do it. As we have seen, this simply is not so. Doing a good thing is utterly incompatible with a lack of desire, volition, and coercion. God will not and cannot create such a rationally chaotic state of affairs. It would offend his rational sensibilities.

### **Second Source of Confusion**

Secondly, step 4 results from a confusion of Yahweh-the-Transcendent with Yahweh-the-Judge. We saw above that step 4 is a valid inference if it has Yahweh-the-Transcendent in view. It is not a valid inference if it has Yahweh-the-Judge in view.

To mistakenly understand step 4 with reference to Yahweh-the-Judge rather than Yahweh-the-Transcendent presents a faulty and misleading picture of God. God, rather than being the divine author, is perceived to be the divine bully. Rather than seeing him as the transcendent cause, it views him as an overpowering and invincible ordinary cause.

This false picture of God logically leads to a false dilemma upon which the whole Formal Ethical Objection turns. If divine determinism is proposing that Yahweh-the-Judge is the cause of human choice, then logically I am faced with a choice: either God (Yahweh-the-Judge) is the determinative cause of my choices, or my own volition (my own desires and willings) is the determinative cause of my choices. Since both are ordinary causes, they cannot both be the determinative cause of my choices. Either God's causation is determinative, or my own will's causation is determinative, but they can't both be determinative.<sup>201</sup>

Clearly, this becomes the crux of the argument against divine determinism. Divine determinism is seen to have chosen God (Yahweh-the-Judge) as the cause of human choice, thereby precluding one's own will and volition as the cause of human choice. Given this false dilemma, either God (Yahweh-the-Judge) causes my choices or I do. Divine determinism, then, renders volitional striving futile and pointless. Why exert myself in trying to choose what is right? My will does not govern my actions anyway. God does.

But the picture changes completely when I recognize that step 4 is

---

200. I first discussed this in chapter 3.

201. Granted, God's will and power could exert influence on me simultaneously to the influence of my own desires and volition. But only one of them can be the *decisive* influence such that it is the determinative cause of my choice. To whatever extent God's (Yahweh-the-Judge's) influence could be determinative, to that extent it would be coercive. If it were irresistibly coercive, then what would happen to moral accountability for that volition? See the discussion in chapter



valid only if Yahweh-the-Transcendent is in view. It ceases to be valid when Yahweh-the-Judge is in view. Yahweh-the-Transcendent is not an irresistible ordinary cause. He is a transcendent cause. Accordingly, that the determinative cause of human choice could be both God (Yahweh-the-Transcendent) and one's own volition simultaneously is no longer unthinkable. They are not identical kinds of causes. *Volition is the ordinary cause of human choice. God is the transcendent cause of human choice.* For a human will to be the determinative ordinary cause of human choice while the divine will is the transcendent cause of that very same choice is not at all problematic. Both can be equally determinative of an event without any logical conflict.

Take Newton's falling apple. What caused it to fall? Gravity? Or God? Divine determinism quite readily acknowledges both as the determinative cause of the event. One can affirm both without contradiction. Similarly, divine determinism sees no conflict in affirming both human volition and God as the determinative causes of human choice and action. Human volition is the determinative ordinary cause. God is the determinative transcendent cause. Accordingly, to affirm the latter does not require me to reject the former—viewing it as futile, pointless, and irrelevant. Indeed, the rational order of things requires both causes to be present for any event to transpire.<sup>202</sup> In order for an effect to follow, not only must there be a transcendent cause, there must also be the requisite ordinary cause.

This is where the confusion contained in step 4 can lead to the fallacious reasoning of the Formal Ethical Objection. The Formal Ethical Objection is unsound because it fails to recognize that, as divine determinism sees it, human volition and divine causation are not on a par and, hence, are not mutually exclusive. Divine determinism does not force me to choose one explanation over the other. Both are valid explanations of human choosing, and both must be operative. The transcendent will of Yahweh-the-Transcendent must determine my choices, but my own desires and volition must determine my choices as well. Accordingly, contrary to the objection, the absence of any desire and will to do the specific good thing that God wants me to do could and would (so long as this lack of willingness persists) prevent me from doing it. By misconstruing divine causation as just another ordinary cause powerful enough to be determinative, this argument assumes that divine causation precludes the possibility that human volition is the determinative cause of human choice. This

9.

202. Human volition is a likely exception. It may very well have no ordinary cause. See note 195 above. I will proceed to speak as if human volition is the ordinary cause of my choices and free actions even though, strictly speaking, this may not be the truth about the free actions of free moral agents. They may—so far as ordinary causation is concerned—be uncaused, having only

simply is not true. Divine determinism fully recognizes that human volition is the determinative cause of all human choice and action.

## ANALYSIS OF STEP 5

**STEP 5:** *If divine determinism is true, my own lack of desire and volition to do some particular good that God wills me to do could not prevent me from doing it and neither could my own lack of desire and volition to do some particular evil that God wills me to do prevent me from doing that.*

As a direct inference from step 4, step 5 suffers from exactly the same confusion as step 4. In one sense step 5 is true, however. Specifically, if a desire to do evil rather than good exists in me, such a desire is no obstacle to God's causing me to do good. The existence of a preference for evil over good at the present moment does not prevent God from replacing my desire to do evil. Whereas in the present moment my desire may be for evil, in the next future moment my desire may be for good. In this sense, of course, the conclusion in step 5 is a true and necessary implication of divine determinism.<sup>203</sup>

But in another sense step 5 is not true. So long as God causes the desire to do evil rather than good to continue in me, God cannot rationally cause me to do the good deed he commands me to do. Therefore, whereas my own present lack of desire and volition to do some good deed that God wills me to do, strictly speaking, could never ultimately prevent me from doing it, yet the continuing lack of desire and volition to do that same good deed must necessarily prevent me from doing it. Whether step 5 is true or not is dependent upon which of these is meant. The following reformulation of step 5 would be true:

**STEP 5A:** *If divine determinism is true, my present lack of desire and volition to do some particular good that Yabweb-the-Transcendent wills me to do could not prevent me from doing it and neither could my present lack of desire and volition to do some particular evil that Yabweb-the-Transcendent wills me to do prevent me from doing that.*

---

a transcendent cause.

203. It is this fact, of course, which is the solid foundation of the Christian's hope. This fact is a source of tremendous joy, comfort, and encouragement for the believer. No amount of stubborn rebellion on my part can ultimately thwart God's purpose to grant me my full inheritance as a child of God and the fullness of the blessing that goes with it. See chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of this point.

204. To strive to attain a desire and volition to do good without reckoning with the only way human beings can attain it—namely, as a gift of God's grace—is indeed futile in an entirely dif-

But this reformulation of step 5 would be false:

**STEP 5B:** *If divine determinism is true, my continuing lack of desire and volition to do some particular good that Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do could not prevent me from doing it and neither could my continuing lack of desire and volition to do some particular evil that Yahweh-the-Transcendent wills me to do prevent me from doing that.*

## ANALYSIS OF STEP 6

**STEP 6:** *If divine determinism is true, to strive to attain a desire and volition to do good things is futile with respect to the ability to actually do them.*

We can see now that the conclusion reached in step 6 is false and that the Formal Ethical Objection is logically flawed. It has led us astray. By the logic of divine determinism, to strive to attain a desire and volition to do good deeds is not at all futile and pointless.<sup>204</sup> Indeed, it is very necessary! The volition to do good deeds is an absolutely essential prerequisite to a person's doing them. It is the necessary ordinary cause of a person's good deeds. If that cause is not present, it is rationally impossible for the effect to be present. In other words, you cannot do good deeds without wanting to do them.<sup>205</sup> So, far from being futile, striving after the desire and volition to do good deeds is an essential prerequisite to good deeds being done. Step 6 is utterly false.

So where does the argument go wrong? Step 6 is a valid inference from step 5 only if we construe step 5 as step 5b. But as we argued above, step 5b is false. I can embrace step 5b only if I fail to see that a lack of desire and volition to do some particular good thing is logically incompatible with choosing to do it; and, further, only if I fail to recognize that divine determinism's claim is that God (Yahweh-the-Transcendent) is the transcendent cause of human choice, not the determinative ordinary cause of human choice. Divine determinism does not reject the commonsensical notion that human desire and volition constitute the determinative ordinary cause of human choice.

---

ferent sense from the one being proposed by this argument. This argument proposes that divine determinism renders striving after goodness futile *in theory*. Christian theology asserts that striving after goodness (as opposed to trusting God for it as a gift) is futile *in practice*. These are two entirely different and distinct issues. We must not confuse the two here.

205. Throughout this present discussion, I am discounting physical coercion. Furthermore, one can, of course, do something with good effect without doing so intentionally. But that would not qualify as a good action in the sense in which I mean it in this context.

## **ANALYSIS OF STEP 7 THROUGH STEP 12**

The argument is straightforward from step 7 through step 12. If step 6 were sound, then steps 7 through 12 would likewise be sound. But since step 6 can be seen to be unsound, then the argument of steps 7 through 12 lead to an unsound conclusion as well, being based upon a faulty premise in step 6.

## **CONCLUSION**

It simply is not the case that divine determinism logically requires that one understand striving to be good as a futile and pointless exercise. On the contrary, divine determinism perceives striving to be good as an essential prerequisite to doing good. If one does not strive after good, he will never do good. To conclude that moral laxity is logically implied by divine determinism is a faulty and simplistic understanding of the theory.

## **The Informal Ethical Objection**

The demonstration that divine determinism, rightly understood, does not logically require moral laxity does not stop the ethical objection. The objection continues:

Divine determinism may not logically justify moral laxity, strictly speaking, but it leads to moral laxity just the same. It takes a pretty sophisticated understanding of divine determinism to know that moral laxity is not justified by it. People aren't that sophisticated. Even though it may be strictly fallacious for them to do so, most people will, in fact, think that divine determinism permits moral laxity. Accordingly, divine determinism gives them the excuse they need to be morally lax.

It is difficult to know exactly what this argument is supposed to be. It seems that there are three possibilities. I will explain and respond to each of the three possibilities:

### **FIRST POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

Perhaps the argument is this: Divine determinism is not worthy of our affirmation because it is a doctrine that can be and is used to rationalize

evil behavior.

### **RESPONSE TO THE FIRST POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

This is an utterly unworthy objection. What theory is not vulnerable to the creative distortions of the evil human mind? Theoretically, anything could be used as a basis for rationalizing my evil. Anything! So long as my inferences need not be logically sound, there is no premise that could not be turned into the “logical” foundation for evil by some specious rationalization.

If to embrace any theory that could be used to rationalize evil is a mistake, then none of us should be Christians. Christianity has been used as the logical basis for the crusades, the inquisition, imperialism, and innumerable other blatant evils throughout human history. Shall we encourage people to avoid Christianity because they might fallaciously use it to rationalize evil? That is a stretch. By the same token, it would be absurd to discourage acceptance of divine determinism simply because someone might employ it to rationalize their moral laxity. If divine determinism is true, as this work has argued, then it needs to be accepted regardless of what people may do with it.

Obviously, the use of a doctrine or a theory is of no relevance to the question of whether it is true. If validly derived ramifications of a theory are contradictory, incoherent, or evil, then one has a legitimate basis for rejecting that theory. But the fact that faulty inferences from a theory could be employed to rationalize or justify evil behavior is not a legitimate basis for rejecting it. Such is of no relevance to the truth or worthiness of the theory. False inferences can neither condemn nor recommend a doctrine, regardless of what practical results might follow.

### **SECOND POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

But perhaps the argument intended involves a more sophisticated statistical argument: Whereas 90% of those people who believe in divine determinism live morally lax lives, only 30% of those people who do not believe in divine determinism live morally lax lives. Therefore, not believing in divine determinism is morally preferable to believing in it.

The “advance” over the last interpretation of this argument is that, though anything can be exploited for purposes of rationalizing evil, not everything is exploited to the same degree in practice. Perhaps what this

objection is suggesting is that divine determinism is, in fact, exploited as a rationalization for moral laxity to such a significant degree that the actual, demonstrable effect of the doctrine is to promote immorality. Thus, it is argued, we ought to discourage people from embracing the doctrine.

### **RESPONSE TO THE SECOND POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

The first thing to note is that such an argument involves a blatant disregard for truth. What relevance does the social effect of a belief have with respect to its truthfulness? None! If something is true, it is true. It makes no difference what unfortunate impact a belief might have. Our goal as knowers is to understand reality the way it actually is. To try to enforce or promote beliefs according to any other standard (such as their social benefit) is to fly in the face of everything intellectual integrity demands of us. It can never be good and right to believe what is not true—regardless of how socially beneficial we may deem it. To believe what is not true is evil.

Is divine determinism true? Then we must embrace it without regard to its negative social effect. If it is not true, then we must reject it with equal disregard for its positive social effect.

Furthermore, I suspect this argument is based on a myth. I doubt very seriously that a careful and accurate study would discover the kind of statistical patterns that this objection assumes. It is more likely that the majority of people who truly believe in divine determinism are diligently seeking after righteousness, not living lives of moral laxity.<sup>206</sup> I do not have hard scientific data at hand any more than the objector does, but I seriously doubt that divine determinism has the negative moral impact that is often alleged.

But even if the alleged statistical pattern did exist, to argue that such a statistical pattern establishes the existence of a cause and effect relationship is fallacious. It would be silly to argue, for example, that because everybody who breathes air dies, breathing air must be the cause of death. Likewise, it would be silly to argue that because 96% of professional basketball players are over six feet tall, playing professional basketball makes people grow tall. A statistical relationship does not, in and of itself, establish cause and effect. So even if the alleged statistical pattern does exist, it would not follow, necessarily, that belief in divine determinism produces or promotes moral laxity. There could be a completely different network

---

206. Especially if we are careful to distinguish between fatalism and divine determinism, two very different doctrines. See appendix E.

of cause and effect relationships that bring about the statistical pattern.

Here, for example, is an obvious possibility: Anyone who wants a theological justification for moral laxity will tend to see in divine determinism a theology that they can readily misconstrue in order to rationalize their moral laxity. Hence, people wanting a theological rationalization for moral laxity will tend to gravitate toward divine determinism. I, frankly, do not think that this is true. But if it were, it would explain a statistical correlation between moral laxity and belief in divine determinism that does not entail that moral laxity is caused or promoted by one's belief in divine determinism.

### **THIRD POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

This brings us to the final suggestion as to what this informal objection might be arguing: Divine determinism is a complex and confusing doctrine. It is very easy to misconstrue it to imply that striving after moral goodness does not matter. Hence, from a moral standpoint, it is a doctrine best left ignored and assumed not to be true. In other words, since it is a dangerous doctrine—a doctrine that can easily lead to moral laxity—it should not be entertained.

### **RESPONSE TO THE THIRD POSSIBLE FORM OF THE INFORMAL ETHICAL OBJECTION**

This understanding of the objection involves the same blatant disregard for truth as the other interpretations of the objection. In the final analysis, what difference does it make how confusing, complex, and dangerous a belief is to its truthfulness? General relativity theory is complex, confusing, and easily misunderstood. Does that mean it is not true? Theories of the atomic structure are dangerous (people use them to build atomic bombs). Does that mean we should reject the theories? Belief in justification by virtue of God's grace can be easily misunderstood and is, in that sense, a dangerous doctrine. Should we pretend, therefore, that justification is not the result of God's grace? This is not clear thinking.

Beyond that, the doctrine of divine determinism need not be as confusing and as easily misunderstood as it is assumed to be. Understanding God as our author, who is creating us like characters in a story, brings the nature of transcendent causation and *ex nihilo* creation into a realm that is readily accessible to our commonsense intuitions. We do not have to find divine determinism and its implications for human responsibility to be as

mysterious and incomprehensible as we typically do. It's not easy, of course. We are dealing with one of the most intellectually challenging concepts in all of human thought. But it is not hopeless. We can understand who God is in relation to us and learn to think skillfully, intuitively, and accurately within the worldview of divine determinism.

As we do so, it will become increasingly obvious how unthinkable and unjustified moral laxity is in the light of divine determinism. If divine determinism is true, there is one and only one logically sound choice a person can make: to strive to imitate the holiness of God. Granted, if God does not will it to be, then, left to myself, I will not and cannot make it happen. I am at God's mercy in that sense. But, if I do not strive after holiness, it is guaranteed that I will not attain it. To choose to strive after his holiness (something that will only happen as God, in his mercy, determines me to do) is the only wise and logical choice. God may decree that I will not be wise and logical. But the fact that to strive after righteousness is what I ought to do will always remain the truth. Divine determinism does not imply anything different.

## **Conclusion**

The ethical objection to divine determinism, regardless of what form it takes, fails. It fails because it is based on a false understanding of what divine determinism is and how it is to be conceived. Rightly understood, divine determinism promotes moral goodness, not moral laxity. There can be no valid objection to divine determinism on the basis of its ethical implications.