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ON THE LOGIC OF INTENTIONAL HELP: SOME METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONS

Roderick M. Chisholm and Dean W. Zimmerman

In this note, we explore certain aspects of “the logic of helping”; offer an account of the metaphysics of helping God; and suggest a way in which God’s help differs from human help.

We presuppose the following thesis of natural theology: that all contingent beings depend for their existence upon an omniscient necessary substance. Our concern is to compare the ways of helping and being helped by a *necessary being* with the ways of helping and being helped by a *contingent being*.

The Logic of Helping

From

(a) x helps y to bring about z

it follows that

(b) y helps to bring about z

but not that

(c) y helps x to bring about z .

My being helped by someone to bring about some event implies an intentional relation between me and the event in question. Jones’s helping Robinson to do something implies that Robinson, at least, “knows what he’s doing”, whether or not Jones does.

But I can unwittingly help you to do something, in which case it is simply not true that *you* helped *me* to do it. “The scientist—by virtue of his published research—helped to create the very bomb he so adamantly opposed.” But of course the manufacturer of the bomb could not be said to have helped the scientist to create the bomb. If something helps y to bring about z , then any individual which contributes causally to z is such that it helps y to bring about z , but will not in general be such that anything helps *it* bring about z .



If you are to *help God* to do something, then the event in question must be the result of something God does and something you do. But, since *every* contingent thing depends for its existence upon God, and every event depends upon His concurrence, it is unclear how you could make a separate causal contribution to, for example, the creation of a thing.¹ There is, however, a way in which this might happen.

The Nature of Causation

We assume that causation is more than “the constant conjunction of events”—this because of the nature of causation and also because of the nature of events.²

We take as undefined the concept of a *sufficient causal condition* of an event. If an event has a sufficient causal condition, then it is an event that is causally *determined*; otherwise, it is causally *undetermined*.

Any event (say, your walking) has a substrate (you) and a content (the property of walking). An event that is determined may have a content that is implied by the content of an *undetermined* event which has the same substrate. If your walking is causally determined, your walking in a certain direction may yet be causally undetermined. In this case, we could say that the event of your walking “falls under” that of your walking in a particular direction:

- D1 Event E falls under event H =df the content of E is implied by the content of H, the content of H is not implied by the content of E, and E and H have the same substrate.

For any events *E* and *H*, if *E* falls under *H*, then anything which contributes causally to *E* also contributes causally to *H*. Whatever factors made you walk also contributed causally to your walking in a certain direction, even if there was not a sufficient causal condition for your walking in that direction.

How One May Help God

How, then, may you be said “to help God”?

There are at least two ways in which this could happen. It happens if: (1) God causes you to perform a certain act *E*, and (2) *E* falls under an act that is causally undetermined. Given what we have said about causal contribution, any act under which *E* falls will be one to which God’s action contributes causally. But in the case of a causally undetermined act under which *E* falls, *you* do *something more* than you are caused by God to do.

You may also help God under the following conditions: (1) God contributes causally to *x*-being-*F*, (2) some causally undetermined act of yours contributes causally to *x*-being-*G*, and (3) there is some *H* which implies both *F* and *G*, and *x*-being-*H* also occurs. For instance, Jones may be running swiftly to the right; God helps him run swiftly (by putting wings on his feet), but you make him run to the right (by calling out to him).

Running-swiftly-to-the-right implies both *running-swiftly* and *running-to-the-right*. So *Jones-running-to-the-right* and *Jones-running-swiftly* are both parts of *Jones-running-swiftly-to-the-right*. Since God and you contribute causally to the parts, you each contribute causally to the whole.

In what sense, then, can a parent be said to have helped God in creating the parent's child? The parent does this by performing an act that is causally determined and is such that it falls under an act that is not causally determined. What might the causally undetermined act be? It could be an act determining, with respect to certain properties of the child, that the child will have those properties. An example might be the event of the child's weighing so-and-so many pounds at birth. A gardener could similarly help the Creator produce a plant. It is in such a fashion, we would say, that you might be able to help the deity.

God's help and our help

The way in which the deity helps us differs from the way contingent substances help us. For in the case of your being helped by another human being to bring about some event, it is not always the case that you help her to bring about that event—as we saw from the example of the scientist who unwittingly helped create a bomb, but who was not helped by anyone to create a bomb. Since God always knows what the results of His actions will be, He can never contribute “unwittingly” to the occurrence of any event.³ Thus, whenever He helps you to bring about some event, it is also true that *you* help *Him* to bring about that event.⁴

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NOTES

1. For accounts of God's conserving power, cf. Philip L. Quinn, “Divine Conservation, Secondary Causes, and Occasionalism”, and Jonathan L. Kvanvig and Hugh J. McCann, “Divine Conservation and the Persistence of the World”, in Thomas V. Morris (ed.) *Divine and Human Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 50-73 and 13-49.

2. Cf. Chisholm, *A Realistic Theory of Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 10.

3. This leads to a familiar problem of theodicy: if God knowingly helps us bring about injustices and evils, can we avoid attributing actions to God which are themselves morally reprehensible? For discussion of this question, cf. William E. Mann, “God's Freedom, Human Freedom, and God's Responsibility for Sin” and Alfred J. Freddoso, “Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature”, in *Divine and Human Action*, pp. 182-210 and 74-118.

4. We thank Fred Freddoso and Phil Quinn for helpful comments and suggestions.