

## Timeless Reaction – How an Eternal God Reacts to Free Decisions of His Creatures

*Abstract.* A timeless God is incapable of interacting with creation – this charge is often stated by proponents of divine temporality. In this paper I will demonstrate how eternalism and libertarianism can be made consistent with the view that God interacts with his creatures, for example by answering prayers. To account for divine reaction without postulating temporality in God, I propose to include all divine reactions to any possible event in history as divine contingency plans in the timeless creational decision. Accordingly, the most foundational natural laws should be described as mapping relations of successive world states with possible built-in irregularities.

### 1. Introduction

A timeless agent is a person existing outside of time who is able to act. Acting means bringing about certain states of affairs or events that would or might not have occurred if the agent had not acted. Traditional theists presuppose God to be a timeless agent, who acts (at least) by creating the world.<sup>1</sup> A highly debated question among theologians is whether, additional to his creative act, God acts in history. Some thinkers openly deny God's intervening in nature, some even reject the notion of divine action entirely, others hold that God continues to act by conserving or sustaining the world (that is keeping it in existence – often referred to using the vague concept of *creatio continua*), again others postulate divine action only through human beings, institutions or sacraments, finally some accept the existence of miracles understood as God's sporadically abrogating or manipulating the laws of nature.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of *non-interventionism* often argue based on God's timelessness and transcendence: a timeless agent cannot create laws of nature and simultaneously abrogate them; a timeless agent cannot act in time without being or becoming temporal; a timeless God cannot react to temporal events without being or becoming temporal.

For the sake of argument, I am assuming that there is a coherent account of timeless action with temporal effects. I am not trying to address objections to divine timelessness based upon the incompatibility of divine action and timelessness. Instead, I am focusing on the common complaint that God cannot be truly said to react to creaturely free acts. In this essay I argue that if there is a coherent account of timeless action, God's timelessness is also compatible with divine *reaction*, for example divine reactions to freely spoken petitionary prayers.

First, I will introduce explications of timelessness, agency and reaction (section 2+3). In section 4, I distinguish between two understandings of the world 'reaction' and

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<sup>1</sup> Designating the world as creation is usually understood as implying that an agent freely chose to bring the world into existence. Theists presuming that God *only* acted by creating the world are usually called *deists*.

<sup>2</sup> For example Keener (2011, 764): "The a priori modernist assumption that genuine miracles are impossible is a historically and culturally conditioned premise. This premise is not shared by all intelligent or critical thinkers [...]."

argue that planned actions based on possible events can count as reactions even if the agent does not have the power to change her mind and not execute her plan after the event occurred. Based on this extended concept of reaction, I argue in section 5 that a timeless God – simultaneously with his act of creation – could have prearranged his possible responses to all possible actions of possible creatures in possible histories. In section 6, I discuss how God might have built his contingency plans into the laws of nature, making it obsolete to change or abrogate them in a moment of divine intervention. Finally, in section 7, I discuss why “personal explanations” (whose proponents try to avoid divine causal interventionism by shifting the problem to mental causation) similarly depend on a concept of reconciling temporal action on the mental sphere and divine timelessness.

## 2. Timeless Agency and Experience

Some theists deny that God acts at all and even reject the basic divine attribute of being creator of the universe. Others argue that God’s being personal is incompatible with his being timeless. This is why, before engaging in the argument how timelessness and reaction to contingent events can be reconciled, the question whether free action a genuine relationship with created persons can at all be attributed to a timeless person or respectively to a timeless God shall be shortly addressed.

A person, characterized by Boethius as an individual substance of a rational nature, shall be defined as a subject of experience (possessing an “inner life” non-reducible to a third-person perspective) who can or has the potential to rationally choose between several courses of action. Temporal persons experience and act successively: in some moments in their lives (in early childhood, while dreaming, when acting out of reflex) they only experience, in other moments they deliberate based on values, earlier experiences and rational consideration. A timeless person cannot be perceived as acting and experiencing successively, since succession implies temporality.<sup>3</sup>

In Christian tradition, God is said to be transcending time or existing “outside of time”. According to Augustine, God exists in a timeless present and God created time.<sup>4</sup> God is not bound by time; he does not change; he is not dependent on temporal creation in any way.<sup>5</sup> If God is timeless, he must experience and act *simultaneously*. Is this conceivable?<sup>6</sup> Most human actions are based upon former experience, since experience is the only way we can know about the possible outcomes of our decisions. This is why classical theists are right to say that the concept of acting can only be attributed to creator and creature in an analogous way. A timeless and omniscient person, however, knows all possible outcomes of all possible actions independent of contingent experi-

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<sup>3</sup> Any succession implies change, and, as Aristotle famously stated, change implies time. If a person first experiences *A* and then performs an action *B*, the agent changes over time – from someone who has not yet *A*ed and *Be*d, to someone who has *A*ed but not yet *Be*d, finally to someone who has *A*ed and *Be*d. A time index can then be attributed to the three stages the agent finds herself in.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* XI.13; *City of God* XI.6.

<sup>5</sup> Mullins (2016: 44f.) explicates the notion of an atemporal deity such that (1) God exists without beginning, (2) God exists without end, and (3) God exists without succession, or successive moments, in His life. Many proponents of timelessness also accept that (4) God exists without temporal position and extension. Mullins argues that those theses also imply (5) God cannot undergo any intrinsic or extrinsic change (51).

<sup>6</sup> Several modern authors have tried to give an account of how to conceive divine timelessness, the most proponent include Stump and Kretzmann (1981), Rogers (1994) and Leftow (2002). Since they all agree on explicating timelessness as immutability, it is not necessary for the aim of this paper to discuss these theories individually.

ence. Such knowledge is not only sufficient in order to evaluate the consequences of a particular decision; it is even far more accurate than human inductive knowledge.

The *contingency of the world* allows us to speak of God as creator, and being creator implies some kind of agency which includes libertarian freedom: if God did not have the power to refrain from creating, the world would emanate from God and therefore exist necessarily. God needs to be able to refrain from creating a world so that we can properly speak of the world as creation. We need to think of God as possessing libertarian freedom regarding whether he wants to create a world, possibly even what kind of world he wants to create.<sup>7</sup> Only agents can possess libertarian free will – the power to perform or refrain from performing a certain action given identical circumstances –, or put another way, for an entity to be free, it needs to be an agent. And in Christian tradition, God is commonly understood as timeless creator and therefore as a timeless agent.

Parallel to the problem of timeless divine action is the problem of timeless divine experience. Aquinas characterizes God as possessing the “most perfect” or highest form of knowledge (STh I q.14). Some scholars interpret this in a strongly analogical manner such that God does not have propositional knowledge at all (Alston 1986).<sup>8</sup> But this theory is highly disputed. Proponents of libertarian free will argue that God can only know the contingent outcome of free decisions if his knowledge of these outcomes depends on the actual outcome.<sup>9</sup> This argument becomes even stronger when God’s knowledge of contingents is, as Thomas Aquinas argues, derived from his essence.<sup>10</sup> If these arguments are valid and libertarian free will exists (which I suppose does<sup>11</sup>), God either has no timeless knowledge of contingent events or he experiences all contingent events at

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7 This latter freedom range is disputed: Referring to Leibnizian style arguments it is argued that there is only one axiologically highest ranking (best) possible world and a benevolent omnipotent God is only able to create this possible world. On the basis of Aquinas, others, as Klaas Kraay (2011), for example, argue that there are infinitely many possible worlds with infinitely increasing axiological value, or that there several incommensurable best possible worlds; if this is true, there is no need to deny a benevolent God the ability to choose from a number of creative options.

8 Others have interpreted it as God’s only possessing knowledge of necessary things. Aquinas summarizes the latter opposing position: “It seems that God does not know things besides Himself. For all other things but God are outside of God. [...] If therefore God understands anything other than Himself, then God Himself is specified by something else than Himself; which cannot be. Therefore He does not understand things other than Himself.” (STh I q. 14 a.5) That God can only have knowledge of necessary things is often attributed to Avicenna. Aquinas answers that God does not experience other things in themselves but only by seeing his own essence which is the cause of all other things. Cf. STh I q. 14 a.5: “I answer that, God necessarily knows things other than Himself. [...] Now if anything is perfectly known, it follows of necessity that its power is perfectly known. But the power of anything can be perfectly known only by knowing to what its power extends. Since therefore the divine power extends to other things by the very fact that it is the first effective cause of all things [...], God must necessarily know things other than Himself. [...] A thing is seen in another through the image of that which contains it; as when a part is seen in the whole by the image of the whole; or when a man is seen in a mirror by the image in the mirror, or by any other mode by which one thing is seen in another. So we say that God sees Himself in Himself, because He sees Himself through His essence; and He sees other things not in themselves, but in Himself; inasmuch as His essence contains the similitude of things other than Himself.” Cf. I q.4 a.2: “per hoc quod quidquid perfectionis est in effectu, oportet inveniri in causa effectiva.”

9 This is a shortened version of Zagzebski’s argument (2011b, 75): (1’) God infallibly believes F timelessly. (2’) *I cannot do anything about the fact that God infallibly believes F timelessly.* (3’) Necessarily, if God infallibly believes F timelessly, then F is true. (4’) If (2’) and (3’), then I cannot do anything about the fact that F is true. (5’) Therefore, I cannot do anything about the fact that F is true. (6’) Therefore, I cannot do anything about the fact that I fly to Los Angeles on December.

once, whereas free agents constitute God’s knowledge of contingent free actions through their decisions. For Linda Zagzebski, a rejection of the necessity of eternity is unavoidable in order to maintain libertarian freedom and at least more plausible than the Ockhamist rejection of the necessity of the past: “[T]he intuition of the necessity of the timeless realm is probably weaker than the intuition of the necessity of the past [... since] there are no ordinary intuitions about the realm of timelessness.” (Zagzebski 2001b, 2.2) Based on her elaborate theory of divine timelessness, Eleonore Stump (2017) concludes similarly: “[T]he idea that God’s eternity preclude God’s responsiveness to human beings can no longer be sustained, in my view.”

### 3. Reaction

If God experiences all contingent events at once in his eternal now, it seems that he has no chance of reacting. Reaction involves a quasi-temporal series in God of *creation – receiving information – reacting to the information*. Ryan Mullins (2016: 124) exemplifies this problem regarding the forgiveness of sins: “It would seem that when sinners repent, God would change in His relationship to them and would come to have an accidental relational property.” The New Testament “clearly describes God as changing his attitude toward persons who are in Christ”, which is why the divine timeless research program “cannot account for this sort of change in God’s attitude toward repentant creatures”. The charge expressed here is that timelessness is incompatible with reaction because reaction requires a (temporal) series of events and a change in the person who is reacting. This is obviously true for what I call *standard cases* of reaction. Those involve the following temporally ordered series of events:

1. Agent A performs an action X.
2. Agent B experiences Y, Y being accurate information that A has performed or performs X.
3. Agent B performs an action Z, such that if B had not experienced Y, she would not have performed Z.

In standard cases, agent B decides to react to A’s performing X by performing Z after she has experienced that A has performed X. But there are cases when a decision and the action resulting from that decision are not (even close to being) simultaneous. Sometimes we make conditional decisions long before the conditional event occurs, for example: “If a student asks me to postpone the exam, I will say no.” Such actions, although not free at the time of the action (declining the request), can be traced back to free decisions in the past. The concept of tracing is used to “trace back” moral responsibility of non-free actions to previous free decisions (Fischer and Tognazzini 2009). Similarly, reactions can be traced back to previous free decisions, for example: “I decide to leave my partner if he cheats on me.” Call this the *alternative case* of reaction:

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10 1. No one has the power over God’s essence. 2. It is necessary that if God timelessly sees a contingent fact through his essence, the fact is actual. 3. No one has the power over any contingent fact.

11 I am fully aware that the principle of alternate possibilities regarding human agents is disputed, mostly for the reason to maintain divine sovereignty (cf. Hunt 1999). Even Thomists like Eleonore Stump (1997, 10) try to formulate a version of (“in some sense”) libertarian free will without a standard will-based formulation of this principle: “Aquinas would consequently reject what is called the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP).”

1. Agent B decides to perform Z if A performs X and to refrain from performing Z if A does not perform X.
2. Agent A performs X.
3. Agent B experiences Y, Y being accurate information that A has performed or performs X.
4. Agent B performs Z.

In the alternative case the decision occurs previous to the action. However, it might still be possible that between step 3 and 4 agent B changes her mind regarding performing Z. In order to speak of a genuine reaction one might need to exclude this possibility. Assume Harry freely decides to put a computer chip into his brain that is scheduled to be activated tomorrow at noon and determines him to eat pizza. Or, more realistically, assume Martha freely and intentionally acquires a habit such that in certain situations she does not have the power to act against her habit (such as not choosing the meat-option for lunch when having the opportunity to do so). Call this the *habitual case* of reaction:

1. Agent B decides to perform Z if A performs X and to refrain from performing Z if A does not perform X.
2. Agent B freely acquires a habit H such that she will necessarily perform a Z-type action when experiencing Y-type information, Y being accurate information that someone has performed or performs an X-type action.
3. Agent A performs X.
4. Agent B experiences Y.
5. Agent B performs Z.

Instead of “programming one’s own brain” by intentionally forming a habit, one might program a technical device to perform the intended action. In effect, this makes little difference. If George programs an intelligent weapon to identify specific targets and, if they are armed, eliminate them, it is George who decided to kill them, making the weapon the means of executing his intention. This could be called the *automating case* of reaction:

1. Agent B decides to perform Z if A performs X and to refrain from performing Z if A does not perform X.
2. Agent B programs a computer to automatically execute Z’ (with equivalent consequences as Z) when it receives Y, Y being accurate information that A has performed or performs X.
3. Agent A performs X.
4. The computer executes Z’.

Since habitual cases of reaction can hardly be denied to be genuine reactions and automating cases are structurally equivalent to habitual cases, automating cases of reaction may well be counted as genuine reactions. Why is this important? Because God might act and react in time by having programmed nature to execute his will.

#### 4. Divine Contingency Plans

Sometimes we make up our mind decisively about what we would do in certain possible circumstances, sometimes even to a degree that we are not free to refrain from reacting in that manner in case the situation actually occurs: Our previously defined contingency plan determines what we do.<sup>12</sup> Thus, as demonstrated in the previous section, our deciding and our acting do not necessarily coincide. This also explains why even non-classical theists who presume God to be temporal and the future to be partly open for God can accept that God can predict certain free *actions* with certainty, namely in cases when the free decision resulting in the action was made prior to God's foreknowledge of the action.<sup>13</sup>

Since a timeless as well as a temporal God knows with certainty the set of all possible histories, has unlimited cognitive capacity, and his perfect character is unchangeable<sup>14</sup>, there is no reason not to assume that God has knowledge about how he would react to any free decision by a creature or to any random event in creation in any possible situation in any possible world.<sup>15</sup> Let us call God's knowledge about what he would do in a certain possible situation a *divine contingency plan* and the set of all these plans simply *Divine Contingency Plans (DCPs)*.<sup>16</sup> One such contingency plan could be, from God's perspective, "If, in a certain possible history *h*, person *p*, author of a particular paper, prays to me to help him get his paper published, I will help him by putting the reviewer into a good mood before reading the draft," or "If, in a set of possible histories *h* [or: under certain circumstances *S*], the Israelites try to flee from Egypt, I would help them escape by parting the Red Sea."

Even if God's action *takes* place at a time *t*, there is no reason why he should make the *decision* to intervene at time *t*, since there is no reason why he should not earlier have had the knowledge of (1) every possible situation in each course of history, (2) whether he could intervene in this situation, and (3) whether he would intervene in this situation. Presuming a classical theist's perspective, God can timelessly know for every possible world and for every possible history of a particular possible world how he would react to any particular possible situation.<sup>17</sup> A DCP-eternalist –

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12 One can also say that through our actions we form our character in a way that our contingency plans result from our partly self-made character. Thereby one can lose one's freedom over time. Cf. Pinnock 2001, 170f.: "[T]he range of viable options diminishes over time. [...] [O]ur ability to choose may diminish; as choices become habits, habits become character, and character becomes our very being. In a sense, we are becoming our choices."

13 Open theists such as Rice (1994, 50-53) argue that Christ's foreknowledge of Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial is not incompatible with Judas' and Peter's free will, since both have freely formed their characters in a way such that on the day of the Last Supper, it was determined what they will do the following day.

14 This is true even for the open theist. William Hasker (2008, 27), for example, writes that God does not change according to his nature and his character; his wisdom, power and faithfulness do not change at all.

15 This kind of knowledge is not to be confused with Middle Knowledge. Proponents of Molinism assume that God has knowledge about what a possible creature would freely do in certain circumstances even if these circumstances do not occur, yet even if the creature herself would never come to existence at all.

16 Cf. Collins 2011, 169: „[...] given the view of many open theists that God has made complete contingency plans for all eternity – e.g., God has already decided what action to take for every possible set of creaturely free choices“

17 Such knowledge of counterfactuals of divine freedom can be assumed to be prevolitional in respect to God's act of creation but postvolitional regarding God's decision of how he would act in a world if he created it, since in order to make up contingency plans nothing contingent has to exist. Following the terminology of Robert Adams (1991), one

although presupposing logical dependencies in God's decisions and actions – would need to say that God's making up contingency plans occurs simultaneous to God's act of creating.

Divine contingency plans are not limited to a timeless perspective, however. Even open theists considered integrating divine contingency plans into their account. John Sanders (2007, 207), although being skeptical about such “preresponses” depicts the idea this way:

Some proponents of dynamic omniscience believe that God, prior to creation, knew all possible actions which creatures with libertarian freedom might do, so God decided what responses, if any, he will make to each action. In other words, God eternally decided to ‘prerespond’ to each and every situation which might arise.

Gregory Boyd (2011, 136), on the contrast, speaks in favor of contingency planning:

If we grant that God is infinitely intelligent, he can anticipate each and every one of any number of possibilities as though each was the only possibility he had to anticipate. [...] An infinitely intelligent God can anticipate and prepare for events that *might* and *might not* take place just as effectively as for events that will *certainly* take place. [...] Indeed, since he does not have to spread his unlimited intelligence thin to cover possibilities, God can anticipate each of the events that might and might not take place as if they were events that had to take place, and he can do this from all eternity.

Most explicit is Robin Collins (2011, 169), attributing the view to “many open theists that God has made complete contingency plans for all eternity – e.g., God has already decided what action to take for every possible set of creaturely free choices<sup>18</sup>”.

Since for temporalists God might also successively act and react, DCPs are not necessarily part of an interventionist-temporalist paradigm; they might only improve the plausibility of the theory by minimizing divine risks.<sup>19</sup> For the eternalist, on the other hand, DCPs are an essential amendment to the theory in order to reconcile divine timelessness with human libertarian freedom and divine action in the world. Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, DCP-interventionism has, compared to ordinary interventionism, some major advantages regarding whether God abrogates or changes the laws of nature when he acts.

## 5. Laws of Nature

My following thesis, that all instances of divine action are built into the laws of nature, has been advanced before, although not in a libertarian context: Maimonides explained the dividing water

can say that God's knowledge about His contingency plans is explanatorily prior to God's knowledge about any created entity or even the existence of creation itself.

<sup>18</sup> Similar to Molinists, who hold that God makes His decision dependent on his middle knowledge (knowledge of counter- and prefactuals of human freedom), the temporalist with divine contingency plans can presume that God makes his decision what world to create dependent on his knowledge of counter- and prefactuals of divine freedom, that is the knowledge on what He would do in any possible future course of history.

<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, DCPs do pose a serious threat to temporalism, because for every time  $t$  at which God could make up these plans, there is a time  $t' < t$  when God could have made these plans, since he does not need any information about contingent events to make counter- and prefactual decisions. If this is true, there are decisions that God has made eternally. But God's making eternal decisions is incompatible with the temporalist's claim that temporality is a necessary concomitant of personality and that only persons can be the origin of a free decision.

during the Exodus by assuming that “it was put into the nature of water to be continuous and always flow from above downwards, except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians; it was a particularity of that water to become divided.” (Kreisel 1984, 108) Although, considered to be a determinist, Maimonides’ theory lacks conditionals like “It was put into the nature of the water to become divided in case the water finds itself in Situation S”, the idea already involves a distinction between the divine decision and the derived action resulting from that decision at a different moment in history. Integrating such conditionals are especially important for free will theists, but also for those who believe in genuine randomness in nature.

A simplified way to portrait this theory is the following: There is a set of logically possible worlds  $L$ ; God knows this set through his natural knowledge. A subset of this world is the set of all worlds meeting a certain axiological threshold, which means they are worthy to be created. Call the set of creatable worlds  $C \subseteq L$ . For every possible world within  $C$ , God knows – according to the theory of divine contingency plans – how he would intervene at certain points within the history (or, given indeterminism, a certain possible history) of this particular world. Integrating all these contingency plans into  $C$ , we will get  $C'$ .<sup>20</sup> The problem about this simplified view is that certain interventions might make worlds creatable in the first place. The selection of the subset  $C$  obviously depends on God’s contingency plans – at least partially. Therefore, one needs to postulate a set of metaphysically possible worlds  $L'$ , which already includes modifications through divine contingency plans, which is hard to formalize in the simplified view.<sup>21</sup> This is why I suggest a different approach:

If one holds a necessitarian account of laws and believes that world states are clearly defined and representable by a number or set, the most general kind of representing the laws of the universe is a successor relation between the set of possible world states:  $s \subseteq W \times W$ . The relation  $s$  exhaustively represents what we regard as the *grand unified theory* of natural laws; what we consider to be natural laws are simplifications of or approaches to this unified theory.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, the natural law relation is not sufficient for representing a possible world. Unless the world temporally extends to the past infinite, there must have been a very first world state<sup>23</sup>, call this – including the contingent values of all natural constants – the initial conditions of the universe. A possible world must therefore be represented as the set of an initial world state  $i$  and a suc-

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20  $C' = \{x \mid \exists y (y \in L \wedge y \in C \wedge x = dcp(y))\}$ .

21 The set of logically possible worlds already includes all worlds with any kind of divine intervention; therefore this set cannot be altered or extended by external interventions. This is why a more fundamental formalization is needed to understand divine contingency planning. A formulation like  $L' = \{x \mid \exists y (x, y \in L \wedge x = dcp(y))\}$  involves a function from  $L$  on  $L$ .

22 If  $s$  is bijective, the world it represents is deterministic; if  $s$  is an inverse function, it is indeterministic, but every world state has a clearly defined history (surjective antecessor relation, therefore formalizable as function); if  $s$  is a function, the world is deterministic, but one cannot derive exhaustive knowledge about the actual past from a world state and the natural laws.

23 Some physicists like Stephen Hawking argue that even a universe without an infinite past can be interpreted as a universe without a first world state, see his “no boundary” proposal.

cessor relation  $s$ . The set of all logically possible worlds  $L$  then integrates all possible combinations of initial world states and successor relations.<sup>24</sup>

These possible worlds, however, may contain quite strange events. There is even a possible world, so far indistinguishable from ours, where it is true that when I say “Abracadabra”, the earth will suddenly be relocated as a planet of a different star system. In principle, any possible world state could be arbitrarily connected to any other state – but then we would rather speak of natural chaos than natural law. The relation connecting possible world states is a law-like relation, which means it possesses a high degree of symmetry and simplicity. It might not be possible to conceptualize a subset of  $L$  only comprising law-like successor relations; rather law-likeness seems to be a gradual category.

If a possible world is characterized as initial conditions plus (possibly indeterministic) laws, it “contains” one or more possible histories.<sup>25</sup> A history  $h$  is defined as a set of successive world states (represented as an element of  $L$  with a bijective successor relation) in accordance with certain natural laws and initial conditions.<sup>26</sup> A history can be deduced from a possible world, as theorems can be deduced from an axiomatic system.

For various biological and theological reasons (intelligibility, enabling of free will, divine hiddenness, cognitive distance, soul making abilities etc.) the natural law relation needs to have a structure with a sufficiently low degree of complexity, such that there are quasi-deterministic simplifications available and usable for simple intellects (animals and humans) – we have to be able to predict the outcomes of our decisions in order to act intentionally.

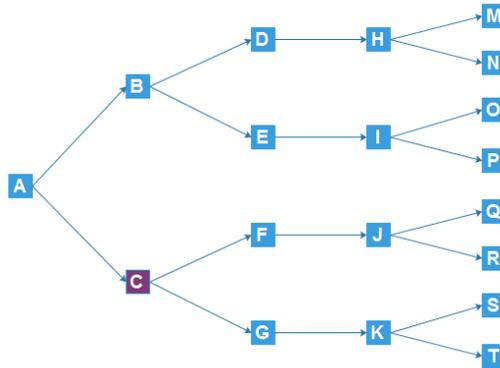


Figure 1: Tree of Possible Histories (no Intervention)

In Figure 1, a *very* simplified illustration of a possible world  $l \in L$  with various branches, altogether 8 possible histories, is portrayed. Note that only knots are shown; those either represent random events or free decisions of persons; between knots without branches (D and H, E and I, F and J, G and K) there could exist any number of deterministic world states. Suppose C is the world state where I have the free decision whether I want to pray to get this paper published, and G the world state in which I actually speak my prayer. However, there is no possible history evolving from G,

<sup>24</sup>  $L = \{(i, s) \mid i \in W, s \in P(W \times W)\}$  or simplified  $L = W \times P(W \times W)$ .

<sup>25</sup> In an eternalist-possibilist paradigm, one could even regard it as a 4-dimensional entity with branching histories.

<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the set of all possible histories  $H$  can be formalized as  $H = \{x \mid x \in L \wedge \forall y, z \in W [(y, z) \in x \rightarrow \neg \exists i \in W (i \neq y \wedge (i, z) \in x) \wedge \neg \exists j \in W (j \neq z \wedge (y, j) \in x)]\}$

that is S or T, where my paper will actually be published. But assume there is a logically possible (albeit not *l*-causally possible) history L which shares with K the same history, but includes possible futures U and V in which my paper will be published. Now God could intervene here by reconnecting possible worlds in order to have my prayer answered, thereby slightly modifying the successor relation within *l*. By contingency planning, God can undertake this modification before even creating the world. Thus, if God eternally decides to answer the possible prayer of a possible me in a certain possible history, he would not first start with creating a world *l*, but immediately create a world *l'* with an already modified successor relation (Figure 2).<sup>27</sup>

Alternatively, a divine intervention could be interpreted not as a modification in causal connection of world states but, as postulated by the Divine Action Project, as a manipulation of randomness. Robert John Russell (2009) calls this approach “non-interventionist objective divine action” (NIODA). Whereas in *s* K is a *genuinely* random knot, in the modified version *s''* (Figure 3) it has become deterministic, while an *apparent* (epistemological) randomness is possibly being maintained. This approach is of course only applicable regarding the exemplary prayer situation if there is a possible (without divine intervention maybe quite unlikely) future S evolving from G where my paper will be published. Here, God intervenes by extinguishing unwanted histories from the beginning.<sup>28</sup>

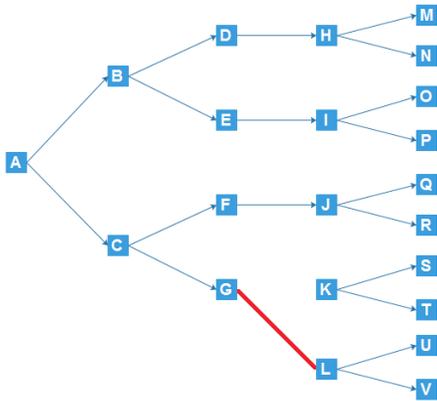


Figure 2: Intervention Type I

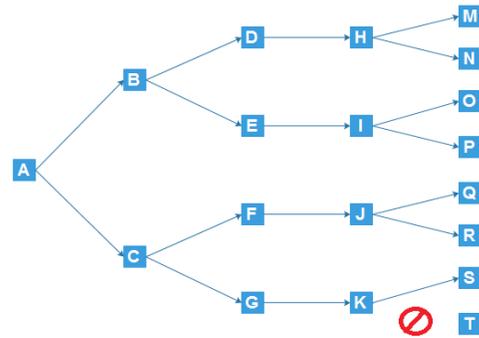


Figure 3: Intervention Type II

The demonstrated concept of contingency plans can be conceived as the furthest step towards non-interventionism without completely eliminating special divine action.

God’s prearranged contingency plans severely complicate the law of nature, for the more apparent modifications<sup>29</sup> for specific events are made, the more difficult it is to establish approximations to and simplifications of the natural law relation – these simplifications with limited scope being what we usually understand when using the plural term ‘laws of nature’. It is therefore plausible why, if God intervenes using eternal contingency plans, his interventions are rare and hardly

<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the modification results in a modified successor relation  $s' = (G, L) \cup \{r \mid (r \in s) \wedge r \neq (G, K)\}$ .

<sup>28</sup> The correspondent modified successor relation is  $s'' = \{r \mid (r \in s) \wedge r \neq (K, T)\}$ .

<sup>29</sup> Speaking of ‘modifications’ might lead to the problematic account discussed at the beginning of this section. In this model, however, God chooses a logically possible world with certain built-in irregularities. Since there is a logically possible world which is almost identical to the chosen world but without having these irregularities, the chosen world could in an analogical way be described as a modification of the other possible world.

or not at all detectable. In addition to the common argument that God wants to stay hidden in order to sustain our free will regarding the belief in his existence, the DCP theorist can argue that God rarely intervenes to keep the natural law relation as simple as possible, so that we are able to grasp and formulate strong regularities in nature. Although God's pre-arranged actions might contradict the perceived regularities in nature, they are not abrogating the law of nature. This is why divine action through contingency planning is, as Thomists put it, not action against natural law (*contra naturam*), but above nature (*super naturam*).

The cost of this theory is to stipulate a certain definition of law of nature: a mapping relation of the set of all possible world states unto itself.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, similar to Medieval *occasionalism*, the theory implies that natural kinds do not possess stabile causal capacities. This worry, however, can be attenuated by acknowledging that divinely intended irregularities are not arbitrary but always in accordance with consistent divine intentions.<sup>31</sup> Still, DCP-interventionism does imply the anti-essentialist thesis that no material substance has any causal power essentially, or, as al-Ghazali claimed, that God has full power over any causal power of any material substance at any time.<sup>32</sup>

## 6. God Acts Through Us

Classical theists, among those many Thomists, reject special divine action, because God cannot be a secondary cause in addition to being the first cause of all things. DCP-interventionism can resolve these concerns. The web of interrelated events does form a self-contained whole, and only the whole depends on the creative will of God.<sup>33</sup> The question here is how God can be thought of as indirectly acting and reacting in the world without becoming a secondary cause, i.e. one of many causal causes. Proponents of non-interventionism (at least those who not claim not to be deists) often argue that God only acts *through* human beings, or only on a *personal* level (Stoeger 1996, 258f.). Even several Thomists agree, advancing the view that the timeless God acts in time only by acting through temporal creatures (Burrell 2000). Call this assumption *mental interventionism*.<sup>34</sup>

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30 A further implication not discussed in this article is that such a theory of law of nature might favor a presentist view of space-time, which, however, might not by all readers be seen as cost; libertarians may even regard this as advantage.

31 Alfred Freddoso stresses this point when defeating an anti-essentialist version of occasionalism against this worry (1988, 103): "So instead of invoking causal dispositions, tendencies and inclinations rooted in the natures of corporeal substances, the occasionalist appeals to God's abiding intention to act in certain fixed ways. Where the Aristotelian will claim that, say, fire has an active causal disposition to heat bodies brought near it, the occasionalist will claim instead that in bringing about natural effects God resolutely follows the (defeasible) rule according to which He heats bodies brought near fire."

32 Cf. Freddoso 1988, 95. Freddoso refers to al-Ghazali's famous example regarding the natural capacity of fire to burn someone, cf. al-Ghazali, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, problem 17.

33 Gordon Kaufman (1972, 132) defines the scientific approach as "a web of interrelated events," forming a "self-contained whole" in which acts of God are "literally inconceivable".

34 Mental Interventionism can be portrayed in various ways: as God's acting through us either by "acting through us", "making us his tool", "setting us free", or "helping us decide". While the first and second options are difficult to reconcile with libertarian free will, God's helping or enabling us would clearly respect our autonomy. God's making us his tool can also be reconciled with free will if God only acts by making us his tool if we have previously freely agreed to let him work through us. This idea is captured in many forms of spirituality, some of them extending God's inter-

However, unless one wants to defend a radical dualist view, this theory presumes some form of causal interventionism, too, since change on the mental level corresponds to some change in physical (neuronal) activity. But mental interventionism can, similarly to standard interventionism, be modified in the light of contingency planning: God has timelessly decided what additional choice options (or other help) he might give to certain possible persons in any possible situation. These mental contingency plans could either form separate laws or might even be, if one advances a moderate dualist view, built into the meta-laws which are mediating between free decisions and causal consequences.

Whether God is thought to causally intervene in the natural course of events or whether he is thought to intervene in the mental sphere: both approaches require a theory that explains how temporal divine action can be reconciled with divine timelessness. Similar to physical-causal contingency plans, mental-causal contingency plans are compatible with divine timelessness, his simplicity and his being pure act. Accordingly, God does not react to our prayers or requests for help *in time*, but he has *timelessly* decided to enable certain possible agents in certain possible histories new choice options or to help them with hard decisions.

## 7. Conclusion

If we have reasons to maintain the commitments of classical theism and thus do not want to drop timelessness and immutability as essential divine attributes, we need to establish a theory of divine action compatible with divine timelessness. I have shown that such a theory is construable without sacrificing libertarian freedom, i.e. the assumption that some creatures have the power to do otherwise in certain situations, by postulating that God pre-arranges possible responses to free human decisions and integrating these contingency plans into the natural law relation. According to DCP-interventionism, God acts only through his primary act of creation: setting a causal beginning of the world and fine-tuning the natural laws. This fine-tuning is exceptionally accurate, to an extent that it does not only guarantee certain general goals in creation, but also guarantees that certain unexpected and unpredictable events follow certain free human actions. On the basis of this theory, such events, if they actually occur, can properly be understood as temporal reactions of a timeless deity.

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vening agency to making people his tool even without their knowledge or consent, which could be interpreted as respecting our freedom as long as we do not explicitly disagree. This is also a possible semi-libertarian interpretation of Aquinas' thesis that God acts by producing faith in human beings ("by the inward instigation of the divine invitation"): We can neither produce faith ourselves nor accept God's offer of a loving relationship by our own will; God is the one who will produce faith unless we do not freely refuse.

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