

## **Divine and Other Interventions**

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### **The worldview that excludes interventions**

Even many philosophers and theologians who believe in the existence of God feel uneasy about divine interventions. They think that these would somehow be in conflict with the natural sciences or that belief in them would be irrational. They say that God acts only within the 'natural order'. I disagree. Divine interventions are perfectly possible, and they are properly called 'interventions'. Some (e.g. Richard Swinburne) hold that God can intervene, but that these are the only interventions there are. By contrast, I shall argue that not only God but many kinds of things can intervene and that there are non-divine interventions all the time.

The worldview on which the aversion against interventions is based was first promoted by Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes, it was refined by David Hume, assumed and propagated by Immanuel Kant, and reached its maximal spread in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hobbes was the first to articulate the idea of a deterministic, necessitating cause, he even held that necessarily all events have a necessitating cause: 'whatsoever effects are hereafter to be produced, shall have a necessary cause; so that all the effects that have been, or shall be produced, have their necessity in things antecedent.' (*De corpore*, 9.5) That excludes interventions.

David Hume added to this the idea of a regular succession, i.e. a general fact of the form 'All events of type x are followed by events of type y'. Although Hume denies that we know about any

necessitation, this probably presupposes Hobbes' idea of necessitation, because why otherwise should there be any regularities of successions? Hume even assumed that *each* event is an element of a regular succession. That implies yet more clearly that there cannot be interventions, because an intervention would be an event of type z, brought about by God, following an event of type x where on all other occasions events of type x are followed by events of type y. Although today the Humean theory of laws of nature is widely rejected, his assumption that laws of nature entail regularities is still part of all major philosophical theories of laws of nature.

In my view these ideas of Hobbes and Hume are entirely wrong. Elsewhere (in my book [\*Die kausale Struktur der Welt\*](#)) I have developed theories of laws and of causation that assume no regular successions, but in this talk I shall focus only on what processes are and how something can intervene into them.

## **Causal processes**

The word 'intervention' implies that something intervenes into a causal process. Can there be a process into which something can intervene? Can there be a process into which nothing can intervene?

At each time during the lifespan of a process, there is a complex state of affairs (i.e. a complex of states of affairs) that is or constitutes it. In the case of the rolling billiard ball it includes the billiard ball with some of its properties and a part of the table with some of its properties. I use 'state of affairs' here synonymously with 'event' and mean by it a property had by a certain thing at a certain time or a property at a certain place and time.

## **Are processes stoppable?**

If every event is necessitated by preceding events, then every event is the result of a causal process that is unstoppable. Is that true? Consider the billiard ball's movement, B, at t2 and its complete cause A at t1. Surely even if A occurs another billiard ball or a cat or some other thing can stop the ball and prevent B from occurring.

One might object that we have to include in A the actual position

and movement of the cat and of the other billiard ball. But however much you include in A, that never excludes the existence of some other thing that might impede B. Even if you include the whole universe in A, the occurrence of A does not make it impossible that there is an extra thing that prevents B. Of course, if you include in A the completeness clause 'and there is nothing else', then A ensures that nothing will prevent B, but that is not what the believer in deterministic causes has in mind, and that is not what excludes divine interventions because God would falsify the 'and there is nothing else'. He has in mind that there are events that ensure what happens after them. But that is impossible. Hobbes was not only wrong in believing that every event has a necessitating preceding cause, even the belief still today shared by many philosophers that some causes are 'sufficient', i.e. necessitating is false. It is impossible that an event necessitates a later event. Therefore all processes are stoppable. Whether a process is stopped depends on what other things exist and how they behave, but no process in itself can necessitate its future.

### **Processes have a direction**

Processes are not unstoppable, but they have a direction. About each stage of a process it is true to say that it is the stage of a process heading in a certain direction. Events (in the sense of 'states of affairs') do bestow on the universe a tendency to carry on in a certain way. In this sense I say, when A is a stage of a process directed towards B, 'there is at  $t_1$  based on A a tendency towards B at  $t_2$ '.

### **Interventions**

Now we can formulate more precisely what an intervention is and what kinds of things can intervene into a process.

There is already an intervention when two causal processes cross each other. When billiard ball A is rolling from position P1 at  $t_1$  towards P3 at  $t_3$ , and at  $t_2$  ( $t_1 < t_2 < t_3$ ) billiard ball B hits it, then B intervened in the process of A's rolling. That is an intervention because there was a process that was heading towards an event E2 instead of which something brought about an event E2' which is incompatible with E2. We can call this process in-

tervention, in the sense of a process intervening in a process. Process interventions are (fallibly) predictable with the laws of nature, but nevertheless they are interventions, because something intervenes in a process.

Embodied rational living beings, e.g. humans, can intervene in causal processes. If some of their actions are not free, then these can be process interventions. If some of their actions can adequately be called free even though they are the result of causal processes and thus there are tendencies towards them, as compatibilists claim, then these too can be process interventions. But if some of their actions are incompatibilistically, libertarian free, then they constitute a different kind of intervention. In a free action the person initiates a causal process by bringing about an event that has no preceding cause. I call this a 'choice event'. (See my '[Free agents as cause](#)'.) If a choice event occurs instead of an event towards which a process was heading, then that is an *agent intervention*. We could further distinguish whether the action was motivated by a drive or by a moral belief. If one holds that an action motivated by a drive involves no choice events and thus no initiation of a process, this would amount to a process intervention, but that is not the only view.

Also animals, i.e. non-rational living beings, can intervene in processes. If none of their actions involve choice events, then all interventions by animals are process interventions. I do not think so, therefore I assume that there are non-rational agent interventions.

## **Divine interventions**

Now we can see that there are several kinds of interventions and that interventions occur all the time. A divine intervention is an event brought about by God directly that occurs instead of an event towards which a process had been heading. More precisely:

*A divine intervention is a choice event of God which is incompatible with an event towards which a process, sustained by God, was heading.*

Divine interventions are thus a case of agent intervention. They differ from human agent interventions in that they are always motivated by moral beliefs, never by drives, and in that God is

not embodied. Having a body is neither necessary for nor an obstacle for intervening by action. Our body is a chunk of matter in which alone we can intervene with choice events. God being bodiless and omnipotent can bring about any event as choice event. God's omnipotence is not required for interventions. Also weak angels and demons can intervene.

I conclude that there are many interventions of different kinds and that there is no reason for thinking that there is somehow no room for them. The view of the causal structure of the world, the 'causal nexus', which made many exclude the possibility of divine interventions is false. If there is a God he might intervene.