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Response to Paul Helm

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Following Augustine, Paul Helm thinks of evil as a privation: “A deficiency or loss or negativity” (56). It “arises as a decline from the good” (ibid.). The explanation for how that could be in a world created by God is twofold. First, God ordains it; he permits (but doesn’t cause) evil to occur. Secondly, since God is perfect, the moral evil he permits “can only arise from the creature” (55), that is, from human beings originally “created ‘very good’ by their Creator,” but who “could change for the worse, and they did” (56).

Now these two sub-explanations, as Helm develops them, don’t seem to me to fit together well. To see this, we must ask of the first: *why* does God permit evil? It is less than enlightening to reply, “It was the good pleasure of God that this is so” (55). For then the question arises: “Why is it the good pleasure of God that this is so?” (ibid.). Helm (following Plantinga) has an answer: the very best possible worlds contain incarnation and atonement and thus sin and evil. “For atonement is a matter of creatures’ being saved from the consequences of their sin; therefore if there were no evil, there would be no sin” (Plantinga 2004, 12). So evil exists because God permits it, and he permits it because it’s best. Without evil, there couldn’t be the overriding good of incarnation and atonement.

It isn’t necessary to descend into the details here.¹ My point is simply that this sub-explanation is incompatible with the second: that evil arises by way of human agency and choice. For there aren’t any of these incarnation and atonement worlds for God to choose from, if in fact evil cannot arise. And given Helm’s Calvinistic commitments, it can’t. Let me explain.

On Helm’s view, all of the evil in the world is ultimately traceable to “the Fall”—a free and deliberate choice to disobey God by the original human pair he created. As the story goes, they were commanded not to eat the fruit, and warned that it would be fatal

if they did. Alas, they decided to eat it. Call this choice DISOBEY—the first evil. It “is not clear” says Helm (57), how DISOBEY could transpire if (as he thinks) everything God created was “very good.” Indeed, he says it is a “mystery.” But of course a confession of “necessary ignorance” (ibid.) isn’t anything like an *explanation* for evil. Helm is sure of one thing, however—that choice was determined:

It is important to stress that such a choice was not a libertarian choice. The original position was not one of neutrality, but that in which human beings were created “very good” by their Creator. It was not that the way of life [not eating the fruit] and the way of death [eating the fruit] were equidistant or otherwise symmetrically before the chooser. (56)

Having said this, Helm promptly invokes *compatibilism*: that “human action is both determined and [yet] . . . the agent is responsible for what he does or fails to do” (57). So Helm wants us to see that the choice is determined. But then if it’s the agent who is responsible for DISOBEY, why not say *he* caused the act? Helm doesn’t give us much to go on here, but he does point us to Jonathan Edwards (ibid.).²

According to Edwards, if a volition (like DISOBEY) lacks a motive, a reason for acting, it has no end or aim and thus fails to “exert any inclination” toward anything. But this is incoherent, says Edwards, since a choice necessarily involves the will moving “by an act of preference and inclination” (1754 [1957], 225). This entitles us to infer

MOTIVE: “Every act of the will (volition) is excited by a motive” (ibid.).

Now MOTIVE is ambiguous. It can be read as expressing a kind of ground-consequent relation obtaining between motives and volitions, in which case it tells us that

MOTIVE₁: Every act of the will (volition) is occasioned by a motive.

That is to say, a volition is *informed by* its motive—that motive being the ground, basis, or reason for which one decides to act. But if motives are reasons for acting, they are at best abstract

considerations. It's simply a category mistake to think they are causes. The agent retains the power to act on a given motive or to refrain. I see nothing at all objectionable in reading MOTIVE this way. It happily leaves room for DISOBEY to count as an original sin or first evil for which Helm's original humans could be held accountable.

But that's not how Edwards (and I suspect Helm) sees the matter. On the Helm-Edwards reading, we should interpret MOTIVE as expressing a Cause-Effect relation. That is, we should read it as

MOTIVE₂: Every act of the will (volition) is caused by a motive.

Thus, volitions are said to be effects "necessarily connected with their motives," which operate "by biasing the will, and giving it a certain inclination or preponderation one way" (Edwards [1754] 1957, 225–26). Now if that's right, the original (non-neutral, non-indifferent) position in which Helm's humans were created involved God's giving their wills "a certain inclination" toward "the way of life." He did this no doubt by giving them the relevant (causally necessitating) motive, say,

M1: Refraining from eating that fruit will satisfy my desire to obey God and prevent my own death ["the way of life"].

But here we strike a problem. For if MOTIVE₂ is true, and if God causally necessitates that those original humans have M1, it will be causally impossible that DISOBEY ever occur and hence that evil ever arise. (This conclusion generalizes across worlds.)

Consequently, if evil really does result from "the chooser" moving "away from the original position" (56), there must be a *stronger* motive, stronger even than the God-instilled motive M1, if that were possible. What could that motive be? If we're following Helm's biblical account (and I'm not averse), it is roughly this:

M2: Eating that fruit will satisfy my desire for food and for gaining wisdom ["the way of death"].

Now these two motivations, M1 and M2, run at cross-purposes. The conjunction of M2 and MOTIVE₂ causally necessitates DISOBEY.

The conjunction of M1 and MOTIVE₂ causally precludes it. Helm must now face a dilemma. Either those original humans chose to act on M2 rather than M1 or they didn't. If they did, then (by MOTIVE₂) there was a third motive that caused *that* choice. You can see where this goes. We're looking at an infinite regress of motives for choosing between motives. Whence, then, DISOBEY?

If, on the other hand, those original humans didn't choose M2 over M1, but instead were directly caused to act on M2, we can rightly ask what that cause was. By hypothesis, everything was created "very good." Therefore, nothing in their nature or circumstances can be to blame. Assuming that M2 isn't uncaused, that leaves either God Himself or that original human pair *qua* agent-causes. Helm and Edwards sadly reject the latter option. Where does that leave them? In a theological fix, I submit. Indeed, Helm is ultimately driven to admit:

It is difficult for some to see how compatibilism can be so without God being the author of sin. Or how under compatibilist auspices evil can be culpable. This is certainly a problem. (57)

It certainly is . . . for the theological determinist. And if this is the way things go across worlds, then sin and evil won't so much as present themselves as possibilities. Tragically then, there won't be incarnation and atonement worlds for God to actualize. This is because there won't be any worlds in which we human beings fall into sin, and in which an incarnate God can redeem us from our evil. Knowing my own moral shortcomings, I don't want to live in a modal universe like that. Happily, for the agent-causal theist cleaving to MOTIVE₁, there is no such transworld moral abyss to face.