

Michael D. Robinson *The Storms of Providence: Navigating the Waters of Calvinism, Arminianism, and Open Theism* (New York: University Press of America, 2003). Pp. x+302. £33.00 Pbk. ISBN 0-7618-2737-4

2450 words.

In what way and to what degree is God in control of what goes on in the cosmos? In the last twenty years, we've seen a deep and wide discussion of these questions. In recent years the main voices have been the open theists, asserting a fairly untraditional understanding of divine providence, and their traditionalist critics, reasserting the visions of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or Molina (or some combination thereof). *The Storms of Providence* is a brief, informed, well-organized, and mostly clear entry into the discussion from an Arminian perspective. The author interacts with the philosophical literature, but includes somewhat a wider set of topics than analytic philosophers are accustomed to covering, including not only foreknowledge, divine control of the world, free will, evil, and divine timelessness, but also predestination, grace, the means of salvation, prayer, divine guidance, Bible interpretation, and evangelism. Thus like several recent entries from the open theist camp, it aims at a wide readership, including students, non-academics interested in recent debates on divine providence, theologians (professional and amateur), and philosophers. Robinson has a knack for summarizing complex material in an understandable way. He gives accurate chapter-length summaries of the three main positions on divine providence, Calvinism (Augustinianism), Arminianism, and Open Theism. Robinson sketches these positions

and argues for the superiority of Arminianism without any of the proof-texting, partisan meanness, and unfairness which plague the theological and popular literature on these topics.

All the aforementioned features contribute to the book's suitability as a textbook for any sort of course focused on Christian doctrines of divine providence. Also relevant is the intrinsic interest of the book's stance. Christians who think that open theism obliterates God's perfection, and that Calvinism rules out human free will and thus human responsibility will be much interested in Arminianism. With open theism, it says that humans have libertarian freedom, God's grace is resistible, and 'predestination' doesn't mean what one would initially think. With Calvinism, divine timelessness is defensible, God foreknows (or rather, timelessly knows) every future free action, and God's eternal Plan includes every detail of what occurs in history (though some of it is only permitted, not causally determined).

What then, is the main thread of argument? Calvinism falls to familiar objections: it seems inconsistent with human responsibility, divine justice, divine goodness, interpersonal relations between God and humanity, and free will defenses and theodicies. Open Theism falls to a novel objection: it implies that God can't know future physically necessary events, the probabilities of future events, future events required by God's own nature, the future constancy of God's nature, that God will ultimately beat evil, or even that God will never cease to exist. (pp. 136, 141). More on this novel attack in a moment – first to the matter of triumphant Arminianism, according to Robinson. First, Arminianism makes at least as good if not better sense of the Bible than its competitors. Robinson's case here (Ch. 5) is subtle, interesting, and original. Beyond

the Bible, Robinson sketches out how the Arminian can successfully reply to common Calvinist charges that Arminianism is incompatible with divine sovereignty, makes God unduly 'dependent upon' creatures, relies on an incoherent doctrine of human freedom, and implies that humans are able to earn their salvation without divine grace. The Arminian can also reply to objections that the traditional doctrine of foreknowledge is incompatible with human free will, and that what is now called 'simple foreknowledge' - timeless or omnitemporal knowledge of all of history which is *not* based on 'middle knowledge' - provides God with no control over what happens.

Three controversial claims thus provide essential vertebrae in the book's backbone: (1) exhaustive and certain divine foreknowledge is compatible with libertarian human freedom, (2) simple foreknowledge is *not* providentially useless to God, and (3) open theism is committed to a God who can't know he'll be around for all of the future. I wasn't persuaded by Robinson's arguments for any of these.

Robinson lays out the basic argument against (1), as discussed and endorsed by Jonathan Edwards. Robinson's analysis is

1. Necessarily, if God knows that I will do A, then I will do A.
2. (Accidentally) necessarily, God knows that I will do A.
3. Therefore, (accidentally) necessary, I will do A.
4. If necessarily I will do A, then I will not do A freely.
5. I will not do A freely. (pp. 109-110, 200)

Events are 'accidentally necessary' if it is now too late in principle for them to be

prevented. As Robinson acknowledges the validity of the argument, he must mean 4 to imply that 'If *accidentally* necessarily I will do A, then I will not do A freely'. Open theists, as he explains, reply that 1, 3, and 4 are true, while 2 is false, for some future events in principle can't be known. What is Robinson's response to the argument? It isn't terribly clear, but I believe it all comes down to denying 4 (understood as suggested above). (pp. 204-210) The idea is that even if every event of your life is at all times unavoidable, nonetheless, some of those events are your own free actions. (p. 210) Only the causal history of an event matters, not its inevitability. I believe this line of thinking is common to other proponents of simple foreknowledge, as well as Molinists, so it is worth exploring why this strikes some of us as *faux* libertarianism.

The rock-bottom intuition on which libertarian free will theories are founded is that a person has no control over whether or not any event happens unless she has at at least one point in her life a unconditional ability to do otherwise than she actually does. And if she doesn't have control over any event, she can't be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for anything at all. If physical determinism were true, that would rule out such any such unconditional ability. But states of affairs other than physical determinism conceivably could also prevent us from ever enjoying a unconditional ability to do otherwise. Suppose that *for whatever reason*, the objective probability of a certain action's occurring is at all times (or timelessly) 1. It logically follows that the probability of its *not* occurring is at all times (or timelessly) 0. It seems no comfort at all to be told that *the physical circumstances plus the laws of nature* don't entail that action at that time, or that when it occurs, the action in question will lack a sufficient event-cause.

Robinson (and any Arminian, and any theist but an open theist) is committed to

all events at all times (seemingly 'free' actions included) having an unchangeable, objective probability of 1 or 0; to put it differently, one of the possible worlds (at all times, or timelessly) is the actual world. Either way, it is 'too late' (literally, or logically) for us to have a say about what does or doesn't go into the actual world. Robinson grants that all free actions are at all prior times unavoidable, but points out (in the words of Katherin Rogers) that '...it is my choice that is the source of the necessitating knowledge. In the very act of choosing I make it impossible that I could choose other than I do choose...' (p. 204) What she means is that it is because the actual world contains my choosing a certain way that God eternally knows that I will make that choice. The second quoted sentence is misleading, though; at no time, in their view, was it possible that I do otherwise; so their view *can't* say that when I freely choose I rendered something impossible (that I not so choose at that time) which was previously possible. That it is in some sense *my* choice provides no comfort; in their view, I at all times do exactly what I must do, given that the actual world has already or timelessly been selected. As Robinson says in the process of criticizing certain Calvinists,

Can a being fail to do what it certainly will do? No! And if such an agent cannot act in a contrary way, how does this differ from... an event that *must* happen? The answer is that it does not differ. If an event certainly will happen, then it appears that it must happen. (pp. 53-54)

In his view free human agents face 'at least two viable options'. (p. 243) 'Viable' here can mean consistent with the laws of nature plus the local physical circumstances, or

consistent with the agent's character, but it cannot mean having an objective probability greater than 0 but less than 1. I'm not the ultimate origin of *any* event, on this theory, despite the existence of 'viable' options.

One strategy for Robinson would be to invoke Frankfurt scenarios to motivate denying 'PAP' - the Principle of Alternate Possibilities; there's a mountain of such literature to choose from, though some of it only a specialist could love (and some of it, only its author!) This might motivate an endorsement of libertarian freedom while denying that anyone ever has an unconditional ability to do otherwise. Robinson doesn't make this move, though, and this reader wonders if this is because he senses that such abilities are necessary to a workable free will defence or theodicy (cf. pp. 63-64, 249-255).

Robinson rather quickly mentions a claim that if true would short-circuit the preceding objections:

...one may assert that the actualization of events is relative to frames of reference... even if events of all temporal coordinates are actual and thus accidentally necessary in eternity, they need not be... actual and accidentally necessary in various *temporal* frames of reference. (p. 210, author's emphasis)

This claim is inspired by a discussion in Brian Leftow's *Time and Eternity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Robinson discusses it at length in his previous book, *Eternity and Freedom: A Critical Analysis of Divine Timelessness as a Solution to the Foreknowledge/Free Will Debate* (New York: University Press of America, 1995).

There he observes, 'If the future is both open and closed relative to one's temporal frame of reference, then, perhaps the future can be closed in the eternal frame of reference without being closed in temporal frames of reference.' (pp. 109-110) I must leave it to the reader to evaluate the coherence of and justification for this claim. It is motivated by the *via media* interpretation of relativity theory; for this, see the discussion in chapter three of Robinson's *Eternity and Freedom* and the sources cited therein.

In his discussion of whether and to what degree simple foreknowledge is compatible with divine guidance of human decisions (pp. 258-288), Robinson sometimes sounds like an open theist, who holds that there is no actual future from God's (or anyone else's perspective), because in reality, the flow of history up till now (including nature's laws and God's plans) is compatible with more than one outcome. As an example, I can't see why *an Arminian* should puzzle over how God could know the consequences of a certain action so as to advise a human about whether or not that is the best course of action. (pp. 268-269) Both the choice in question and the actual consequences, according to the Arminian, lie plain before God's eyes, as it were. Who cares about other *logically* possible worlds, which are *never* accidentally possible? Again, Robinson claims that if humans are significantly free, then God doesn't know 'the exact best course for the actual world' to develop (p. 280), limits the options actually available to humans (pp. 280-281), and His 'vision of the best possible course often will change over time in order to fit the emerging circumstances of cosmic and human life.' (p. 282; cf. p. 283) I can only make sense of these claims on the open theist model of providence; such are ruled out by the Arminian claim that from God's point of view, the future is as settled as the past. In particular, by 'actual world' above Robinson must

mean simply that part of history which has unfolded so far, the idea being that not all of history has yet been decided, as it were, so that multiple futures have yet to be ruled out. (It makes no sense, given the standard technical use of the term 'possible world', to speak of one turning out more than one way; each is defined as spatially and temporally complete set of circumstances, and of logical necessity such a thing cannot change.) Robinson points out that the advice doled out by a timeless God could be different at different times (pp. 286-287), but that being so, according to Arminianism, God's knowledge on which such advice is based *can't* change. Robinson admits that as to understanding divine guidance, his Arminianism is no better or worse than open theism. (p. 285) But it remains, he insists, that open theism absurdly limits God's knowledge.

Robinson offers a complicated argument, previously given at greater length in this journal (36.3, September 2000), that if open theism is true, God can't know (among other things) his own endless future existence. Briefly and too simply, if God is temporal and has no 'timeless vision' of his future, and God's non-existence is not contradictory, then even if God in fact can't go out of existence, how could God *know* that he won't? According to Robinson, this is both a serious difficulty for open theism, and consideration in favour of the doctrine of divine timelessness.

This is indeed an interesting challenge, and it seems to me that open theists owe him a response. One line of reply would be that given our limited conceptual apparatus, we are unable to see any contradiction in the proposition that God doesn't exist, though he does. By being omniscient, he's aware that his non-existence is impossible. Robinson will (I think rightly) reject this as special-pleading. What is it, he asks, that God knows about himself in virtue of which he will ceaselessly exist? I suspect there is a

principled answer here – something like: God knows it is impossible for him to annihilate himself (he’s essentially good, and that would be a morally wrong action), and because of his radical ontological independence, he sees that it is impossible that any change external to him would ‘whip the rug out from under’ his existence. Finally, he knows that his annihilation can’t occur for no reason at all. Thus, he knows that he’ll never cease to exist. Is this a viable open theist rejoinder? Only further discussion will tell.

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