

## Editorial

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## EDITORIAL

Biblical thought presents God as active, not passive. Traditional teaching holds that through God all things are made (John 1:13); that God upholds all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:3); that God acts in history by shaping the lives of individuals like Moses and the prophets and even the histories of entire nations like Israel and Egypt; finally, it says that at the end of history God will replace the old order of things with a new one (Revelation 21: 1-5).

The belief that God acts is a centerpiece of a theistic understanding of reality. It encompasses both God's general endeavors, such as the creation and conservation of the world, and his actions at particular times and particular places. This belief is not a mere armchair phenomenon. Each year millions of adherents of various religious traditions journey to uncountable pilgrimage sites because they believe that God (or the gods) can answer their prayers and act for their benefit.

This belief goes hand in hand with fundamental theological and philosophical questions: Does divine action amount to a violation of the laws of nature or is there a less problematic way to construe it? An answer to this question depends on how we understand the causal structure of the world; and this, in turn, calls for an understanding of the way in which science describes the world and the way in which metaphysics might categorize its components.

These questions are rather philosophical. However, divine action is theologically controversial too. An initial worry for many theologians might be that the proposed way of understanding divine action is too literal, and that any adequate talk about it has to be framed by a hermeneutics of the metaphorical. A different concern might be that a literal notion of special divine action is in tension with the classical divine attributes. Take immutability: If God does not change, how is he able to act in human history? Take omniscience: Isn't special divine action a sign that God had to correct his original providential plan?

Even greater complications arise if we start to reflect on God's nature: If we assume that God is an all-powerful, omniscient, and morally perfect being, then doubts arise over whether we can ascribe to him a robust notion of freedom. Wouldn't any deliberation among possible courses of action undermine this concept of God? If so, how are we to

conceive of the relationship between the classical divine attributes and divine freedom?

Alongside the problem of divine freedom comes the problem of theodicy. If God has free control over creation, why does he not prevent the evils that darken so many human lives? A prominent (and partial) answer is that God respects human freedom even though it is the source of many evils. All that God can do in the light of this respect is provide a world with ever new opportunities for human beings to freely accept his offer of love and friendship.

This view is closely connected to another central topic arising from the theological thesis that no fallen human being can will any good without the assistance of grace: How can divine grace and human will cooperate in such a way that both this thesis and human freedom are respected? This question touches on the intricate relationship and possible alignment of different wills – a topic also of relevance to the Trinitarian conception of God: What is the internal structure of agency of a triune God? Is it a perfect form of group agency or is one divine person acting on behalf of all three?

This short detour shows that the challenge of how to think and speak adequately of God's action is a thorny one extending into all areas of theology. The contributors to this special issue have taken it up. Drafts of these papers were presented at the Analytic Theology Conference "Divine Action in the World: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives" in Innsbruck, August 4-6, 2014, the final capstone event of the Analytic Theology Project.

*Georg Gasser*