

A Tale of Two Cronies

Moll and Ott share a religious vision that includes thinking of creation of the inanimate parts of creation in terms of God's imparting certain causal powers to things. So, for example, limestone is softer than granite, and according to Moll and Ott the reason is that the two have different causal powers. If water runs over limestone, it wears away much faster than when water runs over granite. Water also thus has causal powers, here the power to wear away rock (though both agree that such a commonsense account of the causal power in question will likely give way to a much more sophisticated scientific description when the power in question is subjected to scientific inquiry). From these causal powers arise whatever laws of nature there are governing such entities, and the causal powers thus support counterfactual claims as well. In a deterministic world with nothing but inanimate things, God can create by creating things with causal powers. These powers perhaps even correlate perfectly with the truth of various conditionals, conditionals about what will happen given the original conditions and conditionals about what would happen had things been slightly different from what they in fact are.

Moll and Ott's happy moment of sharing is interrupted by Occ. Occ insists that the story is rather silly. Occ says that God created the things in question together with their characteristic behavior patterns. Occ insists that we not talk of creating things that have power until and unless we can show some need for such talk and we can show that such a creation is even possible. Occ claims that the view shared by Moll and Ott suffers on both counts. Occ notes first that all the explanatory work regarding the unfolding of creation is being done by the conditionals themselves which are claimed to be perfectly correlated with the causal powers. If so, Occ

claims, there is no need for the causal powers at all, unless they come for free in virtue of being reducible to the conditionals. If they are reducible in this way, however, they don't really *make* anything happen. God makes it all happen with his almighty power, a power no one dreams of reducing to conditionals of one sort or another. *That* is real power, Occ insists; whatever is reducible to conditionals is just ersatz power, power in name only. So why bother with it when you want to engage in metaphysics? Perhaps when one is doing science, one might wish to resort to such language, but even there things are far from clear.¹ Talk of causal powers in nature is thus superfluous, it is talk of a mere shadow, an epiphenomenon, of the real power to make things happen, and misleading to mention because of it.

Moreover, Occ, continues, there is a problem with your theory, since you've got both causation and entailment in the same story. On your story, God creates by performing an action that entails the entire history of the cosmos: he makes the things that exist and the rules of the unfolding in the form of conditionals, and the rest is history. But entailment co-opts causation, doesn't it? If one event entails another, say, someone's being a bachelor entailing that they are male, then neither event is a cause of the other. The presence of entailment co-opts the situation in question, so that no power can be displayed by the first thing to bring about the second when conditions are in place that entail it. So, for any event in the course of the history of this cosmos, God's initial creative action entails that this event occurs. So there is no causality in nature and no causal powers distributed by God to the things he creates.

Moll and Ott balk at Occ's arguments, but Occ asks for patience for a reminder. He asks not to be reprimanded on grounds having to do with freedom and other indeterminacies in nature. He points out that he already knows that Moll and Ott aren't determinists, but he asks that they

simply assume determinism when thinking about what he's saying. What to say about indeterminacies can be addressed later, but for now, given determinism, they should agree that all power is God's power.

Moll and Ott wave the point away, saying they aren't convinced and for reasons that have nothing to do with their perspective on human freedom. They note that the entailment claim Occ makes is unassailable: there is an action God performs that entails the entire course of history for the inanimate, deterministic parts of our world. After all, a strong doctrine of providence is suppose to be easy to state, given the assumption of determinism, and the existence of such an action is what is required for such a defense. But, they say, the existence of this action doesn't prevent the dispensing of causal powers, but rather involves it. The action in question entails the future *because* it involves the sharing of power with created things. It is thus not in competition with the presence of deterministic causal powers in things, but rather in cooperation with them. God could have created a world, perhaps, in a way that involved no sharing of power at all, but he could equally have created a deterministic world in which the entire future is entailed in part because he imparts deterministic causal powers to things.

They note also that Occ has noticed an important aspect of their view, that the impartation of causal powers here is rather fine-grained. It is fine-grained enough that the causal power of the water has the precise implications for true conditionals that it does, and fine-grained enough that the causal powers of limestone and granite have the precise implications for true conditionals that they do. It is not as if the imputation of power is one thing, distinct from the implications that displays of the power in question have. The correct story is that the imparted powers are crafted specifically to have the implications when displayed that they in fact have.

Even so, they insist, it is one thing for God to actualize a total world history by imparting such powers and another thing for him to actualize a total world history by imparting no such powers to things, even if the two histories are, at some level of description, identical. The causal powers have precisely the implications they have because of aspects of the creative action of God, that action that entails the entire history of the world. But they are no less real powers because of the entailment. They are no less real because the act of God that entails the entire history also entails the existence of the powers in question.

Occ whines. God performs an action and creation follows; given the action, the result follows logically. There is no work to be done beyond the work God has already done! Nothing more is needed. You grant that a world in which God makes everything happen just as it does in the deterministic world, with no help from causal powers of any sort, is possible. But you insist that the same sequence of events can be accomplished by the impartation of causal powers. In both cases, there is an action of God in terms of the creation of things and the conditionals that characterize them that entails the identical Humean history of particular local fact. But then causal powers are irrelevant unless they come for free. All the work in the unfolding of history is being done by the conditionals, and those conditionals are either metaphysically independent of the causal powers in question or the causal powers are reducible to the conditionals. You have to say this because you want the entailment from God's action to the unfolding of history so that a doctrine of divine providence follows. The central element in all this is the conditionals, not the causal powers. It is the conditionals that carry all the explanatory weight, and the action of God that entails the unfolding of history is the action specifiable in terms of these conditionals, whether, as you say, causal power is involved or not. So causation comes for free or does no

explanatory work in the story, since once we specify the action of God in question, there is no difference to be made in the unfolding of history by anything else. The entailment trumps any such difference makers. There, I've had my say, Occ says, and sits down.

Moll responds. You're right that from point of view of providence, it is all about the conditionals. But there are still two ways to get them. One is to make them true directly and the other is to make them true by imparting causal powers to things. There's no need here to reduce the causal powers to the conditionals; after all, the history of attempts to give such reductions is uniformly littered with failures. What matters isn't reduction, but supervenience, conceived as one-way entailment. Same causal powers gives you same conditionals, and that's all that is needed here.

But there is something important in what you say about the relationship between causation and entailment. You think of God as performing an action specifiable in terms of the conditionals in question and thus entailing all of history (for our imaginary deterministic and inanimate world). Ott and I think of God as performing an action that entails the distribution of causal powers that entail the conditionals in question and thus all of its history. For God to perform the action we are thinking of, he also performs the action you are thinking of. So there is an action God performs that entails the unfolding of history without mentioning causal powers at all. Hence, your point is well-taken: we must deny that entailments trump causation. But we knew all that already, since we can specify causal powers in terms of their characteristic effects and thus generate entailments between events in terms of such specifications of the causal powers of the things involved in the events. Difference-making thus operates in an arena distinct from the arena in which entailments appear. So, you're right, Occ: we insist that causation can

exist between events even when there is a description of each event so that an entailment can be found between the two as well. But that's not a problem, that's our theory!

Ott joins in. That may seem to be an awkward position to be in, but suppose we think of it this way. In some cases, entailments prevent the presence of causation, such as in the case of the event of some person being a bachelor and that person being a male. In other cases, such as the relationship between God's creative activity and the cosmos that results, entailments are compatible with the presence of causation. We have to find a way to split the cases, as the lawyers say. Maybe the difference is that entailments between events in the created order rule out causation. I don't know. But such an account has one virtue in its favor, since we want God's activity to necessitate its result and still be a display of God's power. For it to be such a display of power, it must be causal in some sort of way, for it *makes things happen*. If that's not causal, I don't know what is. So perhaps this way of splitting the cases will do.

Moll nods cautiously, though with a significant bit of intellectual discomfort. She is certain that causal powers in nature is not an incoherent idea, but she is also pretty convinced that logical relations are not causal relations. But of course they can be, since if God makes things happening just by willing them to be so, and there is no possibility of the latter occurring without the former. She is finally convinced. That's it, Ott must be right: entailments that derive from God's activity don't threaten the existence of causal relations in nature.

Both Moll and Ott realize that Occ can turn to skeptical arguments against their view, but they take comfort in the fact that skepticism is a hard problem for any view. Occ realizes the power of skepticism here as well, but decides to respect the metaphysical context of the discussion and not raise epistemological problems at this point. So he says to Moll and Ott, yes,

I see that you can save your view in that way. And I guess I have to agree that entailments aren't incompatible with causal relations in the case of divine activity. The difference is that you two have to bracket entailments from God's activity when looking for power in the world, for displays of causal power are things that make a difference to the course of history. That's a rough idea that needs refining to account for things like overdetermination, preemption, pseudo-preemption, double preemption, and all the other fascinating obstacles to a proper understanding of causation² I won't bother to refine the idea here, because you've already granted the point I need, which is that if we hold fixed God's actions, everything in our imaginary deterministic and inanimate world follows, and there is no room for causal powers to make a difference at all. I, on the other hand, don't have to engage in such bracketing chicanery. I realize you can save your view from contradiction by this device, but it is strained.

Ott objects. We're not bracketing God's activity, we're just bracketing certain descriptions of it, the descriptions that entail the entire course of history. In the two worlds with the same total mosaic of local fact, God's activity is different in the two cases: in one case he imparts causal powers and in the other he doesn't. In both cases, these different acts of God can be described in the same way, and the description is what entails the entire history in question. Bracketing the description is not bracketing the action, just as refusing to allow a description of a cause in terms of its effect isn't bracketing the cause.

Yes you pronounce it *poe-tay-toe* and I say *poe-tah-toe*, Occ retorts. You think all you need is to separate the real activity in terms of causal powers from the description in terms of conditionals. That's no argument, though, that's just your theory. I say the real activity is in terms of conditionals, and the description is in terms of causal powers. But you also say that the

causal powers in question are individuated in a very fine-grained way, so fine-grained that they implicate the precise conditionals which supervene on them. So you cheat when you distinguish the activity of God specifiable in terms of imparting causal powers from a mere description in terms of making conditionals true. In the case of describing a cause in terms of its effect, it is plausible to ask for an intrinsic characterization of the cause in place of such an extrinsic one. But when describing God's activity, you've already committed yourself to the presence of the conditionals in the intrinsic characterization of the activity. Without it, you haven't got the causal powers fine-grained enough for the remainder of history to unfold from the initial creative act of God. So what you have to have in the characterization of God's activity is the conditionals, the rest is gravy.

Yes, Ott says, you can legitimately push us here, and we may have to resort to the idea of characterizing an event or act in terms of its most fine-grained description to draw the distinction we need.

As soon as he said it, though, he realized the mistake. Occ starts to say something, but Ott stops him: Oops, that won't work, will it? In the case of God's activity, the most fine-grained description entails all of history. Hmmm...

Moll comes to Ott's rescue here. Occ, you're right, she says. We are going to have to say something a bit uncomfortable about the relationship between the divine creative activity and causal powers in nature. We are going to have to say one thing about the relationship between entailment and causation in the created order itself, and another thing about the relationship between entailment and causation in order to avoid God's power from engulfing and eliminating the possibility of causal powers in the created order. That's OK, though, since God's activity

both causes and entails one and the same effect, so everybody has to allow some overlap here when including the supernatural realm in the discussion. So it's a bit of a problem to have to say that causation can happen in nature even in the presence of entailment from supernature, but not enough of a problem to compel adopting your perspective.

Ott is nodding enthusiastically. That's what I think I was trying to get at when I suggested earlier that we carve off intramundane claims about the relationship between causation and entailment from those involving God's activity. We should expect some incompatibility between the two when dealing with intramundane matters, but not when God is brought into the picture. We can then get a strong doctrine of providence for deterministic worlds without having to endorse the view that God cannot impart powers to his creation.

Occ says something under his breath about theft and honest toil, but decides to pursue a different line of thought. He says he'll let that point go for now, since, he says, I notice some implications here for something you two disagree about. Neither one of you thinks that our world is either composed solely of inanimate things or that it is a deterministic world. Both of you think there is such a thing as libertarian freedom. And what you have just said makes Moll's position easier to defend, doesn't it Ott?

Moll and Ott are puzzled. They agree on some things and disagree on others, but aren't sure to which disagreement Occ refers. Moll is courageous, though, and speaks up. Let me see, she says. You refer to libertarian freedom, and to a disagreement we have about it's effects. So let's set up the case by adding to our description of the world some animate and free creatures, endowed by their Creator with libertarian causal power. The causal power in question is libertarian because it concerns actions, human actions, we may assume, that are free, and

libertarianism is the correct theory of free human action. For simplicity, let's I'll assume that the characteristic feature of this theory is that it endorses some version of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP), according to which a person has libertarian causal power (or freedom) only if that person could have done otherwise (in some sense). I know there is a bevy of proposals about the exact sense of "could have done otherwise," but let's not get into that unless we have to.

So back to the question of what disagreement Ott and I have. Ott doesn't want these powers to be fine-grained while I do. I want to endorse the view that in creating, God exercises full providential control over every detail of history. Ott doesn't. He wants a responsive God, a God who creates, and then acts further in response to how things unfold. How things unfold, on his view, is neither controlled by God nor fully predictable. I, on the other hand, want libertarian causal powers to be fine-grained, as fine-grained as deterministic causal powers are: they are fine-grained enough that they come with conditionals attached about what the individual with that power will do and would do. Is that the disagreement you have in mind, Occ?

Occ nods agreement that this is the dispute he has in mind. Occ turns to Ott and says, so what don't you like about Moll's view? I'm betting that when you answer, you'll say something that takes us back to the dispute between you two and me.

Ott says, well, I don't think such fine-grained libertarian causal powers are possible. If God imparts such causal powers, then he has done something that entails that the free individuals in question behave as they do, and hence they are not free.

See, Occ exclaims, I told you so! A moment ago, you two agreed that you have to bracket God's entailing activity when discerning whether and which causal powers exist in the created order, and now you appeal to God's entailing activity to claim that Moll's view is

incoherent! I think you are right: her view should be rejected. She shouldn't be allowed to bracket God's entailing activity here, just as it shouldn't have been bracketed when discussing the possibility of causal powers in nature. Gee, that would get us my view, wouldn't it? I like it!

Ott resists, though. Having once practiced the art of splitting cases, he tries to apply the skill again. He claims that the entailment isn't an issue when it comes to deterministic causal powers, but it is an issue when it comes to libertarian causal powers. For libertarian causal powers are governed by PAP, and thus require a kind of openness of the future that deterministic causal powers do not. So prior conditions that entail an action eliminate the possibility of freedom.

Moll asks if she may take a role in defending her own view and threatens an accusation of sexism against the narrator if denied. She points out that some of her persuasion accept Ott's reasoning, and so deny that God's creative activity entails the entire unfolding of the cosmos. They hold, instead, that some additional premises are needed to yield the complete story of the universe, truths unlike the modal truths of mathematics and logic that are metaphysically necessary. These additional truths, though known by God, are not part of his creative activity.

But I think I see Occ's point: they lost heart too easily. Ott and I have already agreed that entailments from God's activity don't undermine the claim that there are powers in the created order that make a difference to its unfolding. I add that some of these causal powers are libertarian causal powers and some are deterministic causal powers. Ott claims that the entailment in question isn't relevant to the latter type of causal powers but it is relevant to the former. I've never seen why, myself, though we've never quite discussed the matter in these terms. But Occ's presence here makes all the difference, doesn't it? It shows that the worry

about entailment is general enough that if we want to resist its relevance for deterministic causal powers, we should do so as well for libertarian causal powers. God is free to endow creatures with as fine-grained libertarian causal powers as he wishes, and in the view that Occ and I share, he will do so in such a way as to exercise strong providential control over his creation. Perhaps you, Ott, can split the cases in a way that allows his own denial of providence to avoid refutation here, but splitting the cases in such a way as to save your own view doesn't yield any problem for my view. When we split the cases against you, Occ, we didn't pretend that we now had a refutation of your view: we were just trying to keep your argument from undermining ours. Just so here, Ott: you can split the cases to preserve your own view, but in doing so, you don't create any problem for mine. So I repeat my own view: you and I share the view that entailments from divine activity need not undermine the presence in the created order of powers to make a difference, and I add that this goes for completely fine-grained powers of both deterministic and libertarian sorts.

Ott asks for a moment to think, since he finds this all very confusing. He thought he had a good objection, but it now seems to have disappeared. He wants to say that if the entailment holds, then PAP has to be false, since given God's action A, it is impossible for the individual in question to have done otherwise. But he knows this mistake well: it is the mistake of confusing the necessity of the consequent and the necessity of the consequence. God's action A doesn't entail that Fred can't do otherwise, it only entails that he won't.

But even a mistake can help one see the light, and Ott has the experience of a light going on. He says, Look, with deterministic causal powers, if we know the exact nature of the power, we automatically get the conditionals needed for perfect predictability. But that isn't so with

libertarian causal powers, for if it were, PAP would be false and the distinction between libertarian and deterministic causal powers would disappear, wouldn't it?

Well, Moll says, the distinction won't disappear unless you can infer back from the conditionals to the powers themselves. So long as all we have is supervenience, as we agreed above, then there is no problem of a lost distinction here. Moreover, we really don't want more than supervenience, because we want to be able to explain how, for deterministic worlds, different laws of nature (elicitable, we presume, from the causal powers in nature) could yield the same Humean history. So there is no problem of a lost distinction here.

Ott grants the point, but inquires about the former point. He says, even if the conditionals connected to some causal powers are conditionals of freedom, these conditionals imply their ordinary cousins that make no mention of freedom. So I think there is still a problem here, since it should be possible to have the same libertarian power generate two different futures, whereas that isn't possible for deterministic causal powers. After all, isn't that just what PAP tells us? So if the conditionals in question are implied by the power in question, as supervenience claims, then we still get a violation of PAP.

Moll now sees the point, and points out that she only endorsed the supervenience claim for deterministic causal powers. Ott, you are right, she says, the power itself doesn't imply the conditionals when the power is a libertarian causal power. Only when it is a deterministic causal power can there be such an implication. Well, strictly speaking, not even then, she says, because such powers are always subject to divine intervention, in which case the conditional in question would not be true; but the complexities needed to handle the problem of divine intervention won't affect this issue, so let's just bracket the issue of divine intervention and assume that

deterministic causal powers imply the conditionals that make for predictability in the unfolding of history. No such implication is present for libertarian causal powers, so to get predictability, God must attach to each such power a complete set of conditionals of freedom.

Ott is even more perplexed than ever. He understands the point Moll is making, but what perplexes him is the idea that has governed the conversation to this point, the idea about which entailments get bracketed when looking for causal powers and which don't. Ott reminds Moll that this point was crucial in their collective resistance to Occ's arguments, but then notes that Moll seems to be parting company on what gets bracketed here. In the case of an object with deterministic causal powers, if we bracket the conditionals implied by such powers, then we can't predict what will happen next. So it looks like we have to take such conditionals into account. But if we do the same with libertarian causal power, we get perfect predictability as well. We're supposed to be on the same side about what gets bracketed and what doesn't, he says, but if we don't bracket the associated conditionals for libertarian causal powers, PAP is undermined, isn't it?

Moll shakes her head. No, she says, we don't bracket the conditionals in either case. In the case of deterministic causal powers, the conditionals are included in a full specification of the power in question; in the case of a libertarian causal power, they aren't. Whether the conditionals are true is not the issue, since we've already noted that not everything true about the supernatural past can go unbracketed. It can't, if we still intend to avoid Occ's position.

Occ nods his head, all the while thinking to himself that once you start down the path of saving a view by making up distinctions, the conclusion is relatively uninteresting. Narrators get to exercise discretion about which insults by characters get ignored.

Moll continues. What we bracket is the entailing activity of God. Then deterministic causal powers make a difference to the unfolding of history because of the conditionals implied by these powers. And the libertarian causal powers make a difference as well, one that is not perfectly predictable based on the existence of the powers themselves, but only so in the context of God's overall, entailing activity. When predictability flows from a full specification of the power itself, we get a violation of PAP; when it doesn't, we don't. But the same key is being used as was used to open a way out of Occ's objection to causal power of any sort in the created order: bracket the entailing activity of God to show how God can share power with the created order itself.

So, Moll says, there is a view here that makes room for divine providence, even given the defining role that PAP plays regarding some of the causal powers in nature. God could have created a world in which none of the causal powers in question were associated with conditionals of any sort. But God could also create a world with non-deterministic causal powers that come in guises made up of conditionals that allow for predictability. These conditionals, together with the remainder of the divine creative activity, entail the future. But if entailment is allowed to run free as an objection to causal powers in nature, then Occ wins. Since we don't want that, we have to bracket entailments resulting from this activity. Once we do so, there is no objection left to the idea that God can impart libertarian causal powers in various guises in such a way that he displays full providential control over his creation.

Ott is stunned, standing speechless and stymied. He knows not what to say or think. He is convinced that there is still a problem here, but can't get a fix on it anymore. Occ now takes Ott's side. He says that both he and Ott are perplexed by such metaphysical gerrymandering. He

says the lesson of all this is to refuse to take the first step. Directing his remarks to Ott, he insists that the false move was to allow this talk of what gets bracketed and what doesn't to enter in at all. No such sophisticated sleight of hand should have been tolerated. All power is God's power, and to try to think in terms of a metaphysical system that allows us to bracket the divine activity is confused. To try to think philosophically while ignoring the fundamental and indispensable role of God in the origin and continuation of the universe is both unwise and offensive, "unwise" because wisdom requires paying attention to fundamentals and there is nothing more fundamental than the dependence of everything on God, "offensive" because it involves trying to conduct a part of life independently of an acknowledgement of God who is the source of all.

Occ's sentiments are exactly right, though perhaps not his conclusions. His heart is right, but Moll is my hero.

Notes

1. Consider, for example, Bertrand Russell's famous attack on the law of causality in "On the Notion of Cause," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 13 (1913), pp. 1–26, reprinted in *Mysticism and Logic*, (Doubleday, 1953), pp. 171–196.
2. For an excellent group of articles on these complexities, see the collection edited by John Collins, Ned Hall, and L. A. Paul, *Causation and Counterfactuals*, (MIT Press, 2004).