

The Action of God

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I have a very simple point to make in what follows. For all I want to say is that God does nothing. I do not wish to deny that God brings or brought things about (e.g. that the universe continues to exist or that St Paul was converted). So my "God does nothing" has a special sense (it does not deny that action can be ascribed to God). But what I intend in saying it is, I think, something of great importance when it comes to thinking about God in a sensible way. To grasp the point I want to make will save one from following all sorts of false trails when it comes to reflection on divinity.

I

Let's start with what is going on when you or I act. Examples of human actions could include opening a door, wiping one's nose, making a telephone call, baking a cake, and waving goodbye to a friend. But what is common to these examples, and to others which might be mentioned?

There is at least one thing common. For they all involve people going through a process. I open a door by reaching for the door handle and exerting a continued pressure on it. I wipe my nose by transporting with my hand an object to my nose and moving it about. I bake a cake by walking around a kitchen and following a recipe.¹ I wave good-bye to a friend by lifting my arm and going through a waving motion. In each case I am *first* like this and *then* like that, for I change in at least the sense that I go through a series of bodily processes. And this would seem to be true when I perform any action at all.

You might say that an action of someone can occur even after the person has died. Suppose I want to cause pain to Uncle Henry, and suppose I make a will which leaves him nothing but a raw cabbage — my intention here being to pain him. I won't have done what I wanted to until Henry has the will read to him and then feels aggrieved.² So here, you might say, we have action which does not involve someone going through a process. For, when I am dead and the lawyer is reading my will, I am, presumably, not going through any processes, though I am succeeding in my aim of causing pain to Uncle Henry.³ Yet I cannot do

anything to pain Uncle Henry unless I go through some sort of process — e.g. writing a will which leaves him nothing but an uncooked cabbage. Processes I go through may have effects long after I am dead. But effects ascribable to me after my death will be effects to be related to processes which I undergo in my lifetime. Much that happens in the world now can be causally traced to Hitler. But only because he did what could have been filmed or recorded on tape. He went through various bodily operations. He went through various processes.

II

What now of God? We might suppose that for God to act is for him to be like me. We might suppose that he acts by going through a series of changes. And this is a very common way of conceiving of God's activity. In accordance with this conception, God acts by going through a process as something occurs in the universe, a process which is one in addition to what occurs in the world. He *is doing something* (going through a process — acting) as *something else is occurring* which can be ascribed to him.

Suppose that Fred is miraculously cured of a terminal illness. This is an act of God. How? Because, so many will say, God was alongside Fred (albeit invisibly) doing something he was not doing before (as surgeons, not invisibly, can be alongside people and can be doing what they were not doing before). God was there *curing* Fred, where “curing” means “going through a process” (as “The surgeon performed the operation” means that the surgeon was going through a process as the operation occurred).

On this account, God is a temporal individual who acts because he has a history which can be told by reporting what he was going through (what processes occurred in him) at any given time. He acts as one who is now like this and now like that. He changes. And to say that he is acting now is to say that he is now going through or experiencing what he was not going through or experiencing previously. “The Queen is now launching the ship” implies that the Queen is now undergoing a kind of development. She woke up this morning in the palace, she has made it to the docks, and she is currently moving her arm to make a bottle move, while uttering the words “I name this ship . . .”. On the account of divine activity to which I am now referring, “God is now miraculously curing someone with a terminal illness” implies something similar. On the account of divine activity to which I am now referring, we may suppose that God acts by going through a process, one which has an effect caused by the process.

But is that account believable? It is if you take God to be something like a human being -albeit more knowing and more powerful than human beings (like Zeus and the other gods as depicted in the film *Clash of the Titans*). For human beings act by going through processes. Yet why should we think of God as being something like a human being — albeit more knowing and more powerful than human beings? God is not material. But human beings are material objects (they are essentially material). The Bible speaks of God as if he were a human being for it portrays him as such from time to time. It describes him, for instance, as having emotions, as changing his mind, as being a father (and a mother). But no serious readers of Scripture will take it to be teaching that God is a human being — even though they might take it as in some places teaching that a human being was God. So why suppose that God's actions are to be thought of as being on a par with the actions of human beings?

III

One answer might be: "Because God is a person and because human beings are persons". But this argument cannot force us to conclude that God acts as humans act. I am Welsh and most of the inhabitants of Swansea are Welsh. But it does not follow that I am what most of the inhabitants of Swansea are (I don't live in Swansea, for one thing). In any case, why should anyone want to say that God is a person? Christians have reason for resisting the formula "God is a person" since "The Father is God", "The Son is God" and "The Holy Spirit is God" would thereby entail that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one and the same person — which is hardly a rendering of the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians are not noted for believing that God is three persons in one person, and one might wonder what anyone would be believing if he or she believed that.

Perhaps we should say that God is a person because knowledge and will can be ascribed to him. But that line of thinking is not very attractive either — not if it is designed to lead us to think of God as being like a human being. I have no problem in accepting that if " — is a person" means " — can be said to have knowledge and will", then God is a person. Yet we need not assume that " — can be said to have knowledge and will" is predicable of only one kind of thing. So "God is a person" need not entail that God is something like a single human being. It need not entail that God is anything like a human being. Cats and dogs can know things, can't they? And they can act of themselves without anything obviously making them do what they do. So they can,

can't they, be thought of as having will? They can't, of course, say why they are doing what they do. But is there any sense in which they are suffering from an impediment from which God is lacking? They can't speak English, or French. But is God a speaker of English or French? You may say that he can communicate with us as inspiring someone speaking a language. You might add that, by virtue of the Incarnation, he can speak to us directly in Aramaic. Yet if God inspires St Paul to say such and such, then St Paul is the one doing the speaking. And if Jesus speaks Aramaic, it does not follow that speaking Aramaic is something which can be ascribed to Jesus in his divine nature. As God, Jesus is the Creator of the world. But what possible sense could it make to say that the Creator of the world speaks Aramaic — unless it means that Jesus spoke Aramaic and that, being God, “ — spoke Aramaic” can be predicated of God because Jesus, though a man, was also divine?

IV

So I do not think that believing that God exists commits us to supposing that there is a single person, to be thought of as something like a human being, who must be thought to act as human persons (i.e. human beings) do.⁴ But we can still ask whether God acts as human persons (human beings) do. We can still, for instance, wonder whether he acts by going through a series of processes as I do when I bake a cake.

Many people will say that God must go through a series of processes and that there is therefore no problem in thinking of God as acting by going through a series of processes. Why? An answer commonly given is: “God is a person, and persons go through processes”. We have now, however, seen reason for resisting such an answer, for we have seen reason for fighting shy of the formula “God is a person”. And, so we might add, unless “person” means “human being”, there is no reason for thinking that persons are things which always go through processes. The most famous philosophical definition of “person” comes in the work of Boethius, according to whom a person (*persona*) is “an individual substance of rational nature”.⁵ But that definition will not compel us to think of persons as things which always go through processes — not unless we import a great deal of extra argument in favour of this conclusion.

It is often said that God must undergo processes because he is depicted as doing so in the Bible. But the Bible depicts God as, for instance, having a nose and a womb (not to mention wings). So the language of the Bible taken literally cannot be thought of as final when it comes to how we should think of God — unless we want to assume

that God literally does have a nose and a womb (not to mention a wing or two).⁶ And, so we may note, if the Bible depicts God as undergoing processes, it also depicts him as not doing this. According to the Letter of James, for instance: "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change".⁷ My reading of the modern commentaries on James leads me to think that current exegetes (unsurprisingly) take these words to be saying that God undergoes no alteration, which I take to be compatible with the view that God undergoes no processes.⁸

Considered as words on paper, the Bible will not give us a doctrine of divine immutability. But neither will it give us a doctrine of divine mutability. It says things which can be taken to imply that God goes through changes. And it says things which can be taken to imply that God does not go through changes. With an eye on the notion of God as acting by going through a process, we therefore need to ask what it makes sense to say of God while trying to keep an eye on what the Bible seems to be saying in general and what, in general, it makes sense to say.

V

So does it make sense to say that God is something which undergoes change? And must an account of God as acting be one which takes God as acting to be undergoing change? With respect to the first question, which has been much discussed in recent years, I must here basically settle for asserting that if God is the Maker of the world, then he can only be changeable by being an inhabitant of the world, which he cannot be if he is its Maker. As Peter Geach has written:

If God is changeless, then we may dismiss the question "Who made God?" — the question of a cause for A does not arise if A is changeless. But if God is changed by the changes of creatures, then God will only be one more ingredient in that aggregate of changeable beings which we call the world, and will not be the Maker of the world. Even if we could consistently think of such a God as causing *all the rest* of the world . . . even then the causal questions that arise about other changeable beings could rightly be raised about such a changeable God; as Schopenhauer said, you cannot pick up an argument like a cab and pay it off when it has taken you as far as you want to go. So this God would not be God after all, since he, like his so-called creatures, would have to have a cause.⁹

Geach seems here to be assuming that change in things must be caused, an assumption which seems to me to be reasonable. And his point seems to be that a changing God would be a God who depends for being what he is on the activity of other things, which seems not to fit with what we mean by "God". This, too, I find reasonable. An objector might say that changes do not need causes. Another objector might say God is most properly thought of as something which is dependent on other things for being what it is. But this is not the place to argue these issues.¹⁰ For now, I want to assume that God is changeless, and, on the basis of that assumption, I want to ask whether we can make sense of the notion of God acting. On the assumption that God is changeless, it cannot be that God acts by going through a process. My question, therefore, is: "Can God be thought to act without going through any process?". Can we think of God acting without subscribing to the popular notion of God's action as I reported it in Section II above?

VI

We can only do so if we can make sense of action being ascribed to something whose action does not essentially involve it going through a process. And those who want to say that we can make no such sense have a lot on their side. For to speak of a thing as acting is, in ordinary talk, to speak of something as going through some kind of process. "The Prime Minister acted quickly to avoid the threat of a General Election". We will assume that this is true because, for example, the Prime Minister wrote certain letters, signed certain documents, phoned up his cabinet and spoke to it, fed certain lines to the media . . . and so on. "John took a shower". We will assume that this is true because John turned a tap (or whatever) on, and walked into a shower, and soaped himself . . . and so on. "Mary murdered her husband". We will assume that this is true because Mary, for example, picked up a gun and pulled a trigger . . . and so on.

In other words, ascription of action to individuals is normally taken to imply that they went through some process or other. But we need not think of action as a matter of what is going on (what changes occur) in the agent to whom the action is ascribed. Take, for example, the activity we call "teaching".

How do people manage to teach each other? It seems natural to say that they do it by uttering words or by using blackboards and so on (and therefore by undergoing various changes). For that is how teaching is effected by people. But teaching cannot be defined as going through certain motions. I can utter true statements until I am blue in the face. I

can fill a thousand blackboards with letters and diagrams. But none of these processes will count as teaching unless somebody actually learns something. For this reason it seems necessary to say that, when interested in whether or not I have taught somebody, we are interested, not in changes occurring in me, but in changes occurring in somebody else. I cannot (as a matter of fact) teach you except by undergoing changes of some kind. But my undergoing these changes does not constitute my teaching you. Unless you actually learn something, they are simply fruitless bits of behaviour on my part. Teaching occurs when learning occurs, when someone changes from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge.¹¹

So the activity we call teaching is not, in fact, definable in terms of changes in teachers. And, so we may now note, the same is true of any activity where we have something achieving an effect in or on something else. It is true of any activity where the agent (the “actor”) is what Aristotle would have called “an efficient cause”. It is true of any activity where there is an agent and something passive to it, something in or on which the agent is operative.

One may feel like saying that efficient causes must be said to act in that they always go through a process of change. But it is not obvious that what has an effect as an efficient cause must be something going through a process of change. And it is not the process of change through which an efficient cause goes that interests us when we are ascribing effects to it. What interests us is (a) what is being brought about (what is being caused) and (b) what it is that this derives from.

Here we might return to example of teaching. To say that someone has taught someone something is not to describe or draw attention to changes in someone called a teacher. It is to register the fact that someone learned something. It is also to identify someone as that from which the learning derived. One might say that learning cannot be derived from anything which is not, or which has not been, in process of change. But to say that would be to miss the point. Learning as effected by a teacher only occurs as learning occurs.

So teaching depends on and is constituted by, not what the teacher undergoes, but on what the learner undergoes. We have no reason, in advance of arguments to the contrary, for supposing that learning can only be derived from something in process of change. And the same goes for anything we are pleased to call an effect of an efficient cause — e.g. paining a relative. As we may put it, *the action of an agent lies in the patient*. In the language of Thomas Aquinas: “Action and passion are not two changes but one and the same change, called ‘action’ insofar as it is caused by an agent, and ‘passion’ insofar as it takes place in a

patient . . . Action is an actualization from an agent in something external".¹² My pulling the curtains might involve all sorts of changes in me. But I pull the curtains only *as the curtains go through changes caused by me*, and that is what is essential to there being curtains whose changing position is ascribable to me. When a footballer scores a goal, his limbs will have moved. But the goal gets scored by the footballer only *as the ball goes into the net because of the footballer*. When teachers teach pupils, they will normally have moved their mouths, their legs, or their hands. But they teach only as people learn by virtue of them. Once again: the action of an agent lies in the patient. Or, as Aquinas writes in commenting on Aristotle: "For to be moved to whiteness is the same as for whiteness to begin to become actual in a subject . . . Motion is the actuality of the movable by what is capable of causing motion. Hence it follows that motion is found in the movable or thing moved . . . Motion is the actuality of what is capable of causing motion, and . . . the actuality of the thing capable of causing motion and that of the thing moved do not differ".¹³

VII

At this point, therefore, I suggest that God can be thought to act without going through any process. He can be thought to act because there are things (objects, changes) which can be thought of as his effects. And the moral of this conclusion is that we do not need to worry about what God is up to over and above (invisibly and alongside) what he brings about (what processes he is going through as his effects come about, processes distinct from the coming about of his effects). There being what he brings about is enough for there being the action of God. In this sense, as I said at the outset, God does nothing. Yet his action, notwithstanding, is all pervasive and very much to be reckoned with. For it is, we might say, the being and history of creatures.

There is a point in John's Gospel where Philip says "Show us the Father". Jesus replies: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"¹⁴ Philip, I take it, is trying to look behind or around Jesus for God. He is asked to recognize that he should settle for looking at Jesus. I am asking readers to settle for something comparable when it comes to the action of God. I am asking them to see that the action of God need not be thought of as something other than what is before our eyes.¹⁵ I am asking them to consider that the doing of God is nothing other than the being of the world, the being of anything which is not God. It is not a process in God. In the language of Julian of

Norwich, however, it is something which allows us to say that “God does everything that is done”.¹⁶

- 1 Fr James Sadowsky SJ assures me that, though I might be able to bake a potato, I cannot bake a cake — unless I put a cake in an oven. I can make a cake, but making a cake is not baking a cake. I don't wish to disagree, but I shall let my example stand.
- 2 Uncle Henry might find it hilarious that I have left him a raw cabbage. In that case, of course, I shall not have succeeded in my aim. The same would be true if Uncle Henry dies laughing when the will is read to him.
- 3 I may be decomposing, of course. But that would not be a case of me acting by going through a process.
- 4 Here, of course, I am not being at all original. I am endorsing what I make bold to call the patristic and medieval tradition of thinking about God. I am also endorsing what I take to be taught by numerous councils of the Church. Yet if “original” means “being out of step with much that is commonly said”, what I am saying is original. For is it commonly denied by many modern writers and by many who do not write.
- 5 *Contra Eutychen*, III.
- 6 Medieval commentators on Scripture would here, rightly, ask us to distinguish between different senses in which the words of Scripture are to be understood — e.g. literal and metaphorical.
- 7 *James* 1:17.
- 8 An exercise for the Reader. Look at all the available commentaries on the Letter of James which you can find. And try to construe any of them as clearly saying or showing that James must be interpreted as holding that God is in any sense changeable.
- 9 P.T. Geach, *Logic Matters* (Oxford, 1972), p.322.
- 10 I discuss them in *Thinking About God* (London, 1985), Chapter 6 and *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, 1992), Chapter 8.
- 11 I accept that there is an obvious sense in which one might say that someone has been teaching even though no learning occurred. Fred may claim payment for his “teaching” for an hour even though his student learned nothing. But Fred, to be precise, is not here earning money for teaching. He is earning money for doing things designed to result in learning, which is what occurs when teaching takes place.
- 12 *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, book 5 lectio 5 [on chapter 3 202a22–202b29]. Also cf. *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroistas*, 71–74.
- 13 *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, XI, lect 9, 2291 and 2308–2309.
- 14 *John* 14:9.
- 15 A comparable view is defended by Gareth Moore OP in “A Scene With Cranes: Engagement and Truth in Religion” (*Philosophical Investigations*, Vol.17, No 1, January 1994).
- 16 Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, London, 1978, p. 166).