

# Is embracing metaphysical determinism or free will a better response to suffering?

**Author:**Aku S. Antombikums<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Aku Antombikums,  
antombikums@gmail.com

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Metaphysical determinism argues that God divinely predetermines everything, including human suffering. Contrary to metaphysical determinism, free will or libertarianism argues that not everything is predetermined by God. Therefore, evil does not serve any divine purpose. Libertarianism argues that metaphysical determinism is simply incoherent because it holds that God can predetermine an action and, at the same time, holds that He could stop such an action. This study seeks to find out which of these two views might be promising in responding to the problem of suffering. Contrary to these two positions, this study argues that suffering must be understood contextually. The above-stated responses do not always provide viable answers to the problem of suffering because they are often generalised and conceived from the God-eye view without considering the sufferers' perspectives.

**Contribution:** Although there are a plethora of publications on metaphysical determinism and freewill, this study re-examined both and sheds a nuance for a further development of these two competing views. The article argues that none of these two responses offers the best response to the problem; rather, each has its strengths and weaknesses because they seem to focus on God rather than the sufferer.

**Keywords:** metaphysical determinism; freewill response; the problem of evil and suffering; classical theism; open theism; narrative theodicy; soul-making theodicy and participation.

## Introduction

No doubt, the problem of evil or suffering (broadly construed) is an existential worry that confronts all of humanity, religious and non-religious, including the most pious. Philosophers and theologians from antiquity have provided various responses to the problem, yet it seems none of these responses is sufficient. Each response has its pros and cons. This study is interested in two traditional and competing responses to the problem of evil: metaphysical determinism and free will response. The study examines the impact of the notions of metaphysical determinism or free will response to the problem of suffering on the sufferers' coping mechanisms amid their afflictions. It might not be easy to determine which of these notions might prompt the correct response to suffering, especially the development of resilience in suffering, given that people respond differently to different situations.

As a result, we may want to ask: does it matter if one holds metaphysical determinism or free will in adversity, and what implication does it have on how such a person depends on God for help amid their precarious condition? Or what is the relationship between one's level of existential worry and embracing either metaphysical determinism or free will in the context of suffering? In other words, which notion might bring comfort in adversity? This article will argue that both metaphysical determinism and the free will response to the problem of suffering have strengths and weaknesses. Metaphysical determinism, when overstretched, could lead to fatalism and in the end, God may become the author of evil.

Conversely, the free will response to the problem of suffering sometimes fails to see God's providence in suffering. This article argues that there is a place for both metaphysical determinism and free will responses to the problem of suffering. However, the complex nature of the problem of suffering, especially the experiences of the godly in the Scriptures, compels us to rethink our responses to the problem of evil, taking into account the fact that not all suffering results from divine action or human freedom. Some sufferings are neither metaphysically determined nor the product of human freedom.

Determinism or metaphysical determinism has been defined differently. However, there is at least an agreement that 'Determinism is the metaphysical doctrine that the whole of world history

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is uniquely fixed ...' (Keil 2001:948) by a transcendent power, including the laws of nature. Carl Hoefer (2023) argues that:

Determinism is true of the *world* if and only if, given a specified *way things are at a time t*, the way things go *thereafter* is *fixed* as a matter of *natural law*. (p. 2)

The central idea is that the cosmos must act in a certain way *necessarily* for the doctrine of metaphysical determinism to be true. Hoefer adds that determinism is the idea that '*everything can, in principle, be explained, or that everything that is, has a sufficient reason for being and being as it is, and not otherwise ...*' (Hoefer 2023:2).

Given the broader philosophical notion of the term, metaphysical determinism in the context of this study is a response to the problem of evil, which argues that all of (human) life, for instance, is divinely preordained or predetermined from eternity past by God's foreordination in line with the good counsel of His will.<sup>1</sup> This view argues that given the nature of God's perfection: knowledge and power, especially in relation to *creatio ex nihilo* and its implication for divine *conservatio* and governance, it is metaphysically impossible for anything, including suffering or evil to occur outside the providence of God. This notion abounds in many confessional statements and is upheld by many theologians and philosophers, especially in the three Abrahamic religions.

## Classical theists and metaphysical determinism

Classical theism in Christian theology is the philosophical and theological notion of God that originated in the likes of Clement of Alexandria. However, this conception became dominant in Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and many others down to the present (Kraal 2013:2239). Brian Leftow (1998) argues that the ancestry of classical theism originated in Plato, Middle-Platonism, Aristotle and Neo-Platonism. Leftow believes that it was through Philo of Alexandria that the notions of classical theism were appropriated into Judaism and later to Christianity. Because of this assertion that Classical theism has its root in Greek Philosophy, Leftow argues that the contours of Classical theism are also appropriated in Islamic theology. Thomas Williams (2013) also supports this conclusion.

The classical doctrine of God has been regarded as perfect being theology. The emphasis is on the perfection of the divine being. Most specifically, the great-making properties: omnipotence, omniscience, immutability and the like. The implication of these perfections to the cosmos is that there is a constant divine power behind every action. In other words, many things are metaphysically determined so that there is almost zero probability that their occurrence is questionable.

Classical theists, for instance, Augustine (2000), argue that, contrary to the idea that if God predetermined and therefore

1. Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas and Calvin all propagate ideas reminiscent of this. For Calvin, given that we are benefactors of the goodness of God, we should also be thankful amid adversity. 'He argues that the apostle Paul taught that God's divine plan had destined ... [us to conform] to the image of Christ ... [by] sharing in His sufferings so that just as Christ went through the cross into heavenly glory, we, too, might be glorified after overcoming our [tribulation]' (Antombikums 2022a; Calvin 1960:3.8.1, 702).

knew a state of affairs, it would happen necessarily, God's knowledge of the said state of affairs does not render it a necessary action. Instead, it confirms that it is within human freedom. In that case, human freedom cannot be jeopardised because of metaphysical determinism. Calvin (1960) has no problem with ascribing the works of the wicked to God than accepting that He metaphysically predetermines some state affairs and not everything that happens in the cosmos. Calvin argues that God perpetually sustains the universe. Everything is not only metaphysically predetermined, but God is also preserving everything. It does not mean He has predetermined everything and withdrawn as in some forms of Deism. The central argument is that both suffering and prosperity are metaphysically ordained by God. In the midst of prosperity and adversity, believers need to know that their suffering is not without divine purpose. These may include a lesser evil for the greater good (see Swinburne 2003), soul-making theodicy,<sup>2</sup> participatory suffering and the like.

Metaphysical determinism remained a dominant view in Christian thought for centuries, yet not without rivalry and criticism. The apparent reason for the several criticisms and rejection of metaphysical determinism is the fact that it tilts towards fatalism, and therefore, God assumes responsibility for immoral human actions. Critics argue that from the Christian perspective, the Bible teaches human freedom, which is entirely absent in a deterministic context. In the end, instead of consolation, the goodness of God in permitting or predetermining such an evil is contested.

The free will alternative, which is sometimes understood from libertarianism and compatibility, offers a complementing and or contrary response to metaphysical determinism. For instance, some adherents of metaphysical determinism argue that the divine decree is compatible with human freedom. Although God may have predetermined the suffering of a child, the killings of innocent people because of terrorism all over the world, the killers acted freely. Here comes that distinction between primary and secondary causes.<sup>3</sup>

## Freewill response

The free will response to the problem of suffering has a dominant followership in classical theism also. However, the difference is that in the former, freedom is understood from the compatibilist point of view. The most prominent free will response to the problem of suffering recently is that of Alvin Plantinga.<sup>4</sup> There have been various strands of the free will

2. Irenaeus (2019), Bk. iv, Chap. xxxviii, par. 3, is the precursor of the *Soul-making* theodicy is now championed by Hick (1973).

3. Although Calvin has been a defender of hard determinism, he argues that God does not do everything without intermediaries or a 'second cause'. *Institutes*, 1.17.5. Cf. Antombikums, *Open Theism*, 57.

4. Alvin Plantinga, as stated earlier, who first conceptualised the free will defence against the problem of evil, argues that, unlike the theodist who tries to provide compelling reasons for justifying why evil exists, the defender is not obligated to do so. The defender states what might be the possible reasons God allows a certain state of affairs. Plantinga argues that the defender shows that '(I) [God's omnipotence] is consistent with (2) [God creating a world containing evil and He has a good reason for doing so]', especially with the fact that entities God created have the freedom to bring evil state of affairs into existence. Plantinga (1977:28–29). Cf. Antombikums, *Open Theism*, 35.

response, I am therefore, limiting myself to Open theism as an example of one of those strands and its attempt at theodicy. Contrary to metaphysical determinism and compatibilism, free will or libertarianism, which is mostly now championed by open theists and other relational theologians and philosophers (see Pinnock et al. 1994), argues that evil is pointless because God is not exercising meticulous divine providence over the creation. In other words, many things that happen today are not metaphysically determined. William Hasker (2004) argues that metaphysical determinism logically implies the absolution of human agency in the context of moral evil.

It follows that as God determined some specific actions from the inception:

... with their possible outcome, He must be responsible for the said actions. For instance, if God predetermined the raping of an innocent woman or girl, the killing of an aged man and the destruction of lives and properties, He must be responsible for the outcome of such actions. (Antombikums 2022b:92)

Given that religious people in general, and Christians in particular, believe that when they pray to God concerning some state of affairs, He can change them by either causing them to occur or ending their existence, it might be a futile enterprise to call on God to do so if such a state of affairs was metaphysically predetermined. In that case, metaphysical determinism is simply nonsense because it holds that God can foreknow and predetermine an action and at the same time, holds that He could be called upon to suspend or cancel such a state of affairs as Christians believe when they pray (Sanders 1997).

In libertarianism, to say that an agent is free is to say that such an agent:

... is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action. (Sanders 2007:235)

However, according to libertarianism, metaphysical determinism does not provide a robust environment for agents to perform every action without the interference of a superior external power.

In addition, a few versions of the responses to the problem of suffering that argue that most evils in this life result from the abuse of human freedom, for instance, open theism, hold that because of the nature of creation and God's love for the creation, every response to the problem of evil must originate in the love of God. In other words, the appropriate response to the problem of suffering, which is philosophically apt and biblically grounded, takes the daily devotional lives of the believers into account and, therefore viable, is the logic-of-love defence for the problem of evil (Sanders 2007). The logic-of-love defence argues that evil is allowed, but it is not willed (Sanders 2007). Suffering is inevitable because God, in love, endowed the whole creation with inherent powers and freedom He no longer controls. This freedom is the reason for the existence of all forms of suffering. God cannot stop

human suffering because it is primarily the product of human freedom. The consequence is that this suffering (resulting from human freedom) neither leads to any greater good nor serve any divine purpose because it is not metaphysically predetermined (Hasker 1992).

## Potential problems arising from determinism and freewill response to suffering

### Problems

The first primary problem metaphysical determinism seems to present is that it is highly theocentric and seems to leave no room for human freedom. Of course, classical theists speak about compatibilism of divine action and human freedom. However, it is evident that human freedom can do nothing or little when everything is overruled by the divine power. Metaphysical determinism seems to lay off the burden of accountability for moral evil from humanity's shoulders and places it solely on God. In that case, God may assume responsibility for immoral human actions.

In a retributive context, metaphysical determinism may lead to a lack of moral accountability (Vilhauer 2004). For instance, a child abuser, a terrorist or a corrupt government leader may argue that his actions are external to his will. The sufferers who share the same philosophical or theological views with such a fellow may see no reason why the fellow has to be accountable for their actions. In that case, the sufferer may question God's love and goodness amid their afflictions. It seems this may lead to dismay and hopelessness.

From a historical point of view, many things in the history of humanity, including a quite amount of suffering, do not seem to be metaphysically predetermined. Also, there are many things today whose occurrences are not primarily contingent on God or metaphysically predetermined. There is much suffering today that seems to stem from the abuse of human freedom. It seems not all evils lead to the refining of souls. Furthermore, in many cases, most evils outweigh the good that may be associated with them.

Contrary to the free will response, there is so much evil that human freedom has no role to play, namely natural evil. Flooding, earthquakes and outbreaks of all kinds of diseases, in many cases, have no connection to the expression of human freedom. Of course, some theories suggest that the coronavirus, Ebola and the like were biological weapons. However, as an African, it will be futile to speak about the death of my younger brother's daughter (Julie) because of malaria and typhoid fever as metaphysically predetermined or the expression of human freedom.

In addition, distressing events in recent human history like slavery, the act of terrorism, especially in Africa, the Russian-Ukraine war and the Israelite-Palestinian crises seem to fit into the context of human freedom rather than on metaphysical determinism. Although this is the case, a few read some of the

events in the light of the Scriptural prophecies, which, in that case, amounts to metaphysical determinism. Whatever one's position is, it seems we have no choice but to accept that not all human suffering is predetermined by God, and neither is all of them from the abuse of human freedom. Doing this will be reductionistic and generalisation. Lastly, in the context of open theism, the emphasis on human freedom or the free will response to the problem of evil leads to the exaltation of humanity and divine self-limitation (Highfield 2002).

### Neither determinism nor libertarianism

I am neither advocating for abandoning any of these two responses nor do I want to seek to reformulate any of them, but to draw our attention to the fact that many have also pointed out that finding comfort in adversity is beyond a single response to suffering (Antombikums 2024). There are indeed sufferings that are metaphysically determined, for instance, the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt, the incarnation among many instances in the Bible. It is also true that the deuteronomistic notion of theodicy was rendered impotent in the book of Job; therefore, theologians argue that it was a lesser evil for a greater good. In addition, the Bible (Ja 1) seems to suggest that some sufferings are for purifying the sufferers while others seem a participation (1 Pt 4) in the atoning work of Christ. However, some sufferings had nothing to do with freedom or determinism and many of such do happen today.<sup>5</sup> In Job, what we find is not a theodicy arising from human freedom or because of determinism, although God permitted it. What is clear is the fact that Job rejected the deuteronomistic construct of his suffering by his friends. He refused to give up his relationship with God amid adversity. In other words, he determined that he looked forward to being comforted after enduring unprecedented pains. Because the problem of human suffering arises from different sources, it will be reductionism or oversimplification to conclude that one's suffering is because of metaphysical determinism or because of the exercise of human freedom when no such freedom or divine action was involved, as it was with the story of the blind man in John nine.

Furthermore, the argument that metaphysical determinism not only exonerates human freedom in the context of moral evil but that it is logically contradictory to expect God to change a state of affairs He has predetermined as done in prayers is not entirely true. This is because, as far as prayer is concerned from the Christian point of view, not all prayers are answered affirmatively. If I pray for a job and get it, it may not necessarily be the case that God has answered my prayers. It could be that given the destiny God is shaping for me, He has made it in such a way that I must get that job to actualise my destiny. However, suppose my performance at the job interview is below average, although I have the requisite academic qualifications; in that case, God cannot be accused of not answering my prayers

5. See the volume on 'The Dynamic Theodicy Model: Understanding God, Evil, and Evolution' edited by Piotr Roszak, Sasa Horvat, and Tomasz Huzarek. This volume answers the question: 'If God is infinitely good, how can there be such pervasive pain and suffering in the evolutionary journey of human beings?' I believe that readers who want to wrestle further with the question of whether human suffering is metaphysically evil will find this volume helpful, especially the article by Tabaczek (2024).

because He has metaphysically predetermined that I should be hired, yet I was not hired. At the same time, God cannot be morally culpable for predetermining that I would not be hired if I performed poorly at the interview.

### Adequacy for life amid suffering<sup>6</sup>

Ordinarily, it seems that knowing that God is in charge and that even amid my precarious condition, He is still working out the best for me is comforting and, therefore, desirable. In my previous work on the problem of evil (mentioned earlier), I argue that every responder to the problem of evil does so, hoping to respond to the problem adequately and, in the end, to justify God and to provide comfort to Christians amid suffering. The existential version of the problem of evil (one of the issues metaphysical determinism and free will responses try to address) does not struggle to prove or disprove the existence of God because of the apparent presence of evil. Contrary to the logical and the evidential versions, the existential or religious version examines the problem of evil on individuals and looks at the individual emotional responses and their implications to their faith.

The primary purpose of our response to the problem of suffering should not begin by focussing on offering comfort in adversity but on how to help people find meaning in life. The meaning they find will help determine whether they will be comforted or not. Therefore, what meaning will a victim of terrorism find in a theodicy that argues that God has metaphysically determined that she will be abducted and gang-raped multiple times in the name of God? Or that God cannot defend her from being abducted because He has granted her abductors such freedom that He no longer controls them? Can the supposed purpose that our afflictions are metaphysically determining for *soul-making*, lesser evil for the greater good or that our afflictions result from human freedom provide comfort in our afflictions?

Contrary to metaphysical determinism or the free will response to the problem of suffering, the Bible clearly points out that some suffering has nothing to do with the exercise of human freedom or completely lacks elements of causality.<sup>7</sup> Passages such as Mark 2:1–11 or John 9:1–3 support this conclusion. In other words, Christ taught that there are many sufferings that lack a theodicean motif in the New Testament. Such suffering is pointless and is a result of human falling nature. Our response should address the problem of evil by considering its context so that, in the end, the sufferer might find some comfort amid suffering. However, it seems all theodicies are inadequate to some extent. This inadequacy calls for a re-examination of the claim of every theodicy.

6. For further discussion on this subject, see my forthcoming monograph: *Divine Control, Human Contingencies and the Problem of Evil in Open Theism*.

7. Obviously, the notion that God metaphysically predetermined all afflictions in the Bible is objectionable, given that some biblical prophecies are conditional. The distinction between primary and secondary causes is applicable here because, in some instances, when God declared the destruction of a people through the prophet, for example Nineveh, most of such predictions are contingent upon human responses. See my forthcoming manuscript, *Divine Control, Human Contingencies and the Problem of Evil*, for a detailed discussion on this issue.

These two responses lack the elements of contextualising our responses to the problem of suffering. In the estimation of this article, we have to *deglobalise* theodicy to fit with the global and local context where the problem of evil is experienced. It is also clear that our responses to the problem of suffering may not necessarily or entirely make people happy. Instead, they may make them find meaning amid suffering. The meaning they find determines the state of their minds and whether happiness will be achieved. This assertion aligns with Peter Barger's (1990) statement:

It is not happiness that theodicy primarily provides, but meaning [...] The 'gains' of theodicy for society are to be understood in a way analogous to those for the individual. (p. 48)

*Contextual* responses to the problem of suffering seemed not to be taken seriously. Every theodicy has its pros and cons; therefore, none should be discarded too quickly.

Metaphysical determinism or free will defence (the logic-of-love) do not always provide viable answers to the problem of suffering because these responses are often generalised without consideration for the immediate context where suffering is occurring, nor is there any consideration of the sufferers' perspectives of their precarious conditions. Everything is mostly viewed from *the God-eye view*. As understood in this article, it seems that most of the responses to the problem of suffering in relation to the justice of God from theologians and philosophers focussed more on reconciling God's nature of goodness and justice and upholding His great-making properties in the face of aberrant evil while focussing less on the sufferers' experiences. Despite the fact that the task of a theodicy is an excellent task, it seems our efforts will be less viable if we keep focussing on God. Christians' current reality in the context of persecution despite faithfully following Christ, the outbreak of pandemics and natural hazards, including mismanagement of resources from government leaders, exacerbating and worsening people's condition of living calls for a re-examination of our philosophical responses (Antombikums 2024). Also, suffering in the context of persecution has nothing to do with the use of freedom of the sufferer. Obviously, it seems determinism and free will response to suffering cannot account for suffering resulting from technological advancement today. The consequentialist and retributive notions of suffering, in my estimation must take the question of responsibility and accountability into account. This is another subject that will be addressed in a different article.

It seems we must understand our responses to the problem of suffering as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In my view, all theodicies should be seen as a package providing various responses to the various puzzles of life concerning the goodness, love and the enduring presence of God with the sufferers in their predicaments. As a result, we must be aware that a protest theodicy, determinism, free will, participatory suffering and the like will not always make

sense in every situation involving suffering. Taking the peculiarity of every affliction and its probable cause is the first step to developing a viable response to the problem of suffering. It seems responders to the problem of suffering have been trying to provide the correct answers in the wrong context.

For instance, metaphysical determinism is cherished in Nigeria by many Christians and Muslims alike. However, to argue that the persecution of Christians in the Northern part of Nigeria is metaphysically determining might be less beneficial, offering no comfort. But when it is understood as a participation in the atoning work of Christ, it could lead to the development of resilience on the one hand and comfort on the other as the sufferers now see themselves sharing in the suffering and subsequently in the glory of Christ. In that case, the free will response might be viable because God is not responsible for Christians' persecution. On the one hand, the persecutors are using their freedom as agents of the devil, the enemy of the Church, in persecuting believers in Christ. Contrarily, Christians, on the other hand, because of their relationship with Christ, freely refuse to recant their faith in Christ.

## Conclusion

This article examined metaphysical determinism and the free will response to the problem of suffering as two contrary attempts at theodicy. Given that it is neither always the case that every suffering results from divine activity, nor is it always the case that human freedom is always the cause for our suffering, this article argues that both notions are not entirely adequate on their own. Instead of understanding both as mutually exclusive, they should be understood as complementary because from the narrative of the Bible, some suffering were actually predetermined. Nevertheless, much suffering, both in the narrative of the Bible and today, is caused by human freedom. Also, the article argues that as this is the case, our responses to the problem of suffering should take the context of suffering into account, look at the sufferers' perspective about their predicaments and be aware that some suffering, when understood from the perspective of participating in the passion of Christ could result in comfort, the development of resilience and strong faith in God. In the end, some sufferings have no meaning; they are either natural or because of the degeneration of the human body.

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