Part 1 | Divine Action and the Hard Problem of Consciousness

1 | A Cartography of Crisis

Introduction

At any given moment, an untold number of individuals around the world find themselves experiencing something that has been attested throughout human history: the conscious experience of divine activity, both within their own minds and elsewhere in the world. Prayer, meditation, worship, music, art, contemplation, even theological thinking – these are just a few of the avenues through which religious believers have sought either interaction with God or God's intentional action in specific circumstances. Indeed, Christian scriptures and tradition portray a God who, while transcendent, is also immanent in the natural world – continually responsive to humans and the rest of creation, often to seemingly dramatic effect. Yet at the same moment, physicists, cosmologists, mathematicians, biologists, and cognitive scientists in laboratories and research centres around the world are increasingly discovering the sorts of verifiable, predictable, and empirical mechanisms that would account for the same phenomena experienced by religious believers as divine activity.

The seemingly competitive nature of the explanatory marketplace is nothing new, and the divine action problem has only become more acute as modern science has progressed. In recent decades, the question of divine action has crystallised into what has become known as the "causal joint problem": if an uncreated, transcendent God interacts with nature to bring about specific, responsive divine actions, then at some point divine intentions

must meet physical processes. But how, the question goes, are we to envision the gritty details of this divine–physical interaction, when contemporary science has been so extraordinarily successful at discovering the lawlike regularities that make our universe possible? In answer to this, many in the science-and-religion field have sought scientifically identifiable, seemingly underdetermined causal joints in which God might act in accordance with the laws of nature. However, such causal joint theories (involving, e.g., quantum mechanics or chaos theory) can be strongly critiqued as being scientifically implausible and theologically insufficient. This has left divine action theorists pondering whether divine action scholar Nicholas Saunders's diagnosis may be correct, that "the strong sense of divine action which forms our theological inheritance is simply untenable in the light of our modern understanding of the natural sciences"[1] – in short, that "*contemporary theology is in crisis*."[2]

One contemporary response to this causal joint problem has been to locate divine action in the seemingly mystery realm of the human mind. Many find it easier to accept the possibility of divine action in consciousness than in more obviously physical areas of the natural world. The most prominent proponent of this approach has been philosopher and theologian Philip Clayton, who argues that the emergent human mind may be uniquely open to divine action, insofar as consciousness is both ontologically distinct from neural activity and underdetermined by physical laws. If the mind is uniquely nonphysical and even "spiritual," then divine–human interaction can take place without the violation of any laws of nature – or so the story goes. But while there is an understandable intuitive force behind this argument, it is a proposal that has not been exposed to the same level of theological and scientific

[1] Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xiii.
[2] Ibid., 215.

critique as have other causal joint theories (e.g., those involving quantum mechanics).

This book offers a sustained argument that not only is Clayton's mind-based causal joint proposal scientifically implausible and theologically insufficient but also that the proposal clearly demonstrates the faulty metaphysical presuppositions underlying causal joint theories more generally. To develop a robust theology of divine action that fully accounts for scientific knowledge and methodology, *and* affords the richly textured and robust God–nature relationship affirmed by Christian theism, the underlying assumptions of what I will call the "standard model" (or "standard causal joint model") of divine action must be challenged. While this aspect of my argument is admittedly deconstructive and critical – my intention is not to deny the reality of divine activity in the mind or elsewhere – I do not agree with Saunders's conclusions regarding theology's apparently dismal prospects. Rather, I suggest that by first critiquing the theological and philosophical presuppositions on which standard causal joint models are based, science-and-religion theorists are then freed up to explore new ways of envisioning the relationship between God and creation – namely, through various versions of theistic naturalism (as I will define it in the text that follows). Indeed, a "theological turn" is already evident in science and religion, with theologically driven models replacing scientifically based causal joint programs. These theistic naturalisms seek not to confine divine action to any particular physical space, but to theologically reframe the concept of nature and to explore what it means to be properly natural. Within the metaphysical frameworks of theistic naturalisms, divine action in the mind is indeed plausible, and consciousness may well be a site of particularly intense experiences of divine action (or divine–human interaction) – but for very different reasons than those argued by Clayton. To set the stage for the development of this argument, the rest of this chapter is devoted to highlighting the relevant contextual details surrounding contemporary divine action debates, the philosophy and science

of the human mind, and what I will call the "theological turn" in divine action theology.

Divine Action and the "Standard" Causal Joint Model

The quest to articulate an intellectually sound account of God's activity in the world is a perennial pursuit, with religious thinkers over the centuries attempting to bring their contemporary knowledge of the natural world into contact with theological thinking.[3] While a full historical synopsis of this endeavour cannot be attempted here, it is important to note that the twin reality-seeking endeavours of science and religion have a complex and nuanced relationship with deep historical roots.[4] This being noted, the focus and scope of this book is confined to contemporary proposals in the science-and-religion field that explicitly attempt to bring divine action theology into alignment with current scientific knowledge. In other words, one focal point here is the so-called causal joint – that theoretical space wherein divine intentions meet physical realities in such a manner that the laws of nature are not undermined.[5] The phrase "divine intentions" is

[3] For one helpful examination of the history of science and religion, see John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*. The Cambridge History of Science Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[4] Ibid. While the discrete categories of "science" and "religion" are relatively modern distinctions, the pursuit of knowledge and truth historically germane to the activities of both have often fostered a sense of compatibility between religious and scientific knowledge. This is in stark contrast to the conflictual model often assumed to be inherent to interactions between scientific experts and religious thinkers.

[5] The term *causal joint* was coined by theologian Austin Farrer, though Farrer was extremely pessimistic about the possibility of humans ever positively identifying such a causal nexus. He writes, "The causal joint (could there be said to be one) between God's action and ours is of no concert in the activity of religion; the very idea of it arises simply as a by-product of the analogical imagination." Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (London: A. & C. Black, 1967), 66.

important here, as it alludes to the sort of God and the sort of action of particular interest here. That is, the focal point for contemporary divine action theology is a personal God whose agency entails real intentions, analogous to the sort presumed to be necessary for human agency. As philosopher Donald Davidson explains, "In the case of actions, the relevance may be expressed this way: an event is an action if and only if it can be described in a way that makes it intentional."[6] While the question of agency and the philosophy of action is an immensely complex one, I will here work most closely with a personalist version of Christian theism that understands divine action as involving divine intentions being effected in the natural world. Within this understanding of divine action, the hope for causal joint proposals is that they will allow for theological affirmations of divine action in a world that is governed by identifiable physical mechanisms and regularities: if divine action is located in areas of the natural world that are somehow open to such divine influence, then religious believers and thinkers can claim to take seriously the success of the scientific endeavour, even while they uphold the theological affirmation of God–nature interaction.

A helpful focal point for this discussion is the so-called Divine Action Project (DAP), a multi-year collaborative project co-sponsored by the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences and the Vatican Observatory.[7] Due to its prolonged timeframe (lasting well more than 10 years), the impressive array of scholars involved (including such pioneering figures as Robert John Russell, Arthur Peacocke, Ian Barbour, and John Polkinghorne), and the resulting conferences and publications, the DAP has been

[6] Donald Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy," in *Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. Stuart Brown (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 41–52.

[7] Wesley Wildman uses this label in his helpful survey article; for a useful list of the DAP's publications, see note 2 of Wesley Wildman, "The Divine Action Project, 1988–2003," *Theology and Science* 2, no. 1 (2004): 31–75.

enormously influential in determining the trajectory and parameters of divine action theories in recent decades. While the DAP did not exclude nontheistic thinkers or those who reject intentional divine action,[8] and while a wide range of divine action theories and theologies were proposed, something of a consensus set of commitments resulted from the DAP. First, DAP participants were concerned with seeking maximum "traction" between science and theology,[9] or as Wesley Wildman explains it, "formal and informal logical connections that yield both intelligibility and potential for correction and improvement."[10] While theoretically such a traction-seeking endeavour might give equal weight to both science and theology, it is noteworthy that specific proposals within the DAP tended to submit theological affirmations to scientific scrutiny – rather than the other way around. The most notable exception to this involved theological challenges based on the problem of natural evil; indeed, the DAP evidenced a growing awareness of the theological significance of suffering and its implications for divine action theology.[11] The importance of theodicy for the divine action conversation will be highlighted throughout coming chapters, but it remains the case that the DAP was highly motivated to demonstrate divine action as *scientifically* credible.

A second key feature of the DAP was its assumption that divine activity can be categorised into three distinct subtypes: general divine

[8] See Wesley Wildman's helpful article for the methods, contributors, and outputs involved ibid., 35.

[9] Described by Philip Clayton in Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action*, ed. Zachary Simpson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 53–54.

[10] Wildman, "The Divine Action Project," 37.

[11] The DAP's most sustained treatment of theodicy can be found in Nancey Murphy, Robert John Russell, and William R. Stoeger, S. J., eds., *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil*, Vol. 1 (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 2007).

action (GDA), special divine action (SDA), and miracles. GDA was taken to indicate "the creation and sustaining of all reality insofar as this does not necessarily presume any specific providential divine intentions or purposes," and SDA was considered to be "specific providential acts, envisaged, intended, and somehow brought about in this world by God."[12] Miracles, by contrast, received surprisingly little attention, as they did not seem to align easily with the DAP's commitment to maximum traction between science and religion. Interestingly, it is clear that these distinctions were vital not only for the development of the DAP but also for the science-and-religion field more broadly. Indeed, Wildman explains that "the DAP succeeded in stabilizing terminology that is key for understanding theories of divine action."[13] However, while one might be sympathetic to the intentions driving such a classification, it is also the case that this terminology serves to *shape* – rather than simply to reflect – divine action theories. What may have been a useful distinction for practical and theoretical purposes has now solidified into a conventional wisdom that may hinder theological creativity and real progress in divine action theology.

In any case, the DAP (as well as those scholars subsequently influenced by the DAP) focused its collective attention on SDA: intentional, specific divine activity envisioned as occurring in and through natural processes. In one sense, this seems an obvious strategic choice. After all, GDA is generally equated with the laws of nature and thus understood to be a rather uninteresting category of divine action for those seeking to explore the dynamic, "hands-on" interaction between a divine agent and the natural world.[14] On the other end of the spectrum, miracles were largely

[12] Wildman, "The Divine Action Project," 37.

[13] Ibid., 35.

[14] As will be discussed in Part 2, this dismissal of GDA may be premature; it is merely the case that GDA *as generally conceived* would seem to be altogether distinct from specific, responsive, SDA.

(though not completely) ignored by the DAP, presumably because of the received definition associated with the category: a miracle is often considered – almost by definition, following Hume – to be "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."[15] So long as miracles are defined as outright violations of the laws of nature, they seem an unfruitful focal point for traction-seeking endeavours within science and religion.

The clear theoretical focus of the contemporary divine action conversation, then, has been on SDA that does not abrogate natural processes, and that is not merely a subjective interpretation of otherwise physical or law-governed events. As the DAP's leading scholar Robert John Russell summarises, "[W]e can now understand special providence as the objective acts of God in nature and history, to which we respond, and we can understand these acts in a noninterventionist manner consistent with science."[16] At least partially due to the DAP, the contemporary divine action discussion has thus been centred, to a significant extent, on the question of how God acts objectively in nature without intervening in the (presumably ontological) laws of nature. Related to this is a final commitment evidenced by many in the DAP: to incompatibilism, or the idea that either God or natural processes can be responsible for a particular event, but not both. Wildman explains that "incompatibilists adopt the strategy of showing that the physical world is indeterministic, because this is a necessary condition for non-interventionist SDA. This leads to strong interest in gaps, especially uncloseable gaps, in the world's causal nexus."[17] Any single event can only be identified as divine action

[15] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), 115f.

[16] Robert J. Russell, "Does the 'God Who Acts' Really Act? New Approaches to Divine Action in Light of Science," *Theology Today* 54, no. 1 (1997): 45.

[17] Wildman, "The Divine Action Project," 40.