

Review of Free Will & Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns (Oxford University Press, 2016) edited by Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak, International Journal for Philosophy of Religion (forthcoming)

The essays in this volume address questions about the connections, if any, between theism and various positions on free will, especially libertarianism (the view that we have free will and that free will is incompatible with determinism). Indeed, the volume might just as well have been called *Libertarianism & Theism*, as virtually all of the contributions touch, in one way or another, on the relationship between libertarianism (or aspects thereof) and theistic doctrines.

A central motivation for the volume helps explain this extensive focus on the libertarian view of free will. Timpe and Speak “detect an undertone of suspicion within the community of philosophers working particularly on the problem of free will; the suspicion is that theistic beliefs are exerting an untoward influence upon the debates” (p. 2). The worry in particular, as articulated by Manuel Vargas in the volume’s opening essay, is that theistic belief accounts for the continued interest in libertarianism, a worry that is substantiated to some extent by recent studies indicating that “theistic philosophers are significantly more likely to be libertarians than are atheists, and atheists are significantly more likely to be compatibilists than are theists.” (p. 3) The central motivation of the volume, according to its editors, is to explore potential connections between beliefs about free will, especially the libertarian view of free will, and theistic doctrines.

After an introduction by the editors, the volume opens with Vargas arguing that theistic belief plays a pernicious role in the sustained interest in libertarianism. Drawing on recent empirical data linking theistic and libertarian beliefs, Vargas argues that contemporary defenses of libertarianism are frequently instances of motivated reasoning aimed at defending theism.

Given the well-established connection between that sort of reasoning and cognitive biases, Vargas suggests that we should be somewhat skeptical of libertarianism's credentials.

John Martin Fischer contends that libertarianism has a significant cost, viz., it makes our status as free and responsible agents dependent "on whether the laws of nature have associated with them 100 percent probabilities, instead of 95 percent or 99 percent probabilities." This is a cost, he says, because it seems "curious that *this sort of difference* should change our status as free and morally responsible agents" (p. 48). But if that's right, then there's a further cost for theistic libertarians, on the assumption that belief in free will is necessary to defend theism. Given that assumption, libertarianism would also seem to make the theistic libertarian's belief in God dependent on the empirical question of whether determinism is true. For suppose we confirmed the truth of determinism. Then, given incompatibilism, theistic libertarians would have to give up on their belief in free will and with it their belief in God as well.

Laura Ekstrom raises serious doubts about whether free will, understood in the libertarian way, is really worth the tremendous amount of suffering in the world. She notes that many traditional responses to the problem of evil appeal to the value of free will and, in particular, to the claim that the good of free will as conceived by libertarians outweighs the evil in the world. Ekstrom considers various reasons why having free will might be thought to be valuable. Although she rejects the claim that free will is necessary for things like love, creativity, or a meaningful life, she does incline to the view that it's necessary for moral responsibility, for a true sense of self, and, perhaps, that (indeterministic) free will is intrinsically valuable. Nevertheless, she says that when we weigh these values against the evils of the world, it's clearly not worth it.

Jerry Walls argues that Christian theists in particular have strong reasons to be libertarians. He notes that if free will and determinism are compatible, God presumably could

have ensured that we always freely do the right thing and never do the wrong thing. So why didn't God do that? Even worse, Walls argues, God, according to theological compatibilists, *intentionally determines* people to do things that God has prohibited, which calls into question God's perfect goodness. But not only does God fail to see to it that we always do the right thing and even determine that we do the bad thing, God then judges and punishes us for doing what he predetermined us to do, which seems an especially repugnant thing to do. Walls also argues that theological compatibilism, in conjunction with other standard elements of Christian theology (such as that God truly loves everyone), supports the doctrine of universal salvation, a conclusion that many orthodox Christian compatibilists view as heretical. If Walls is right about this, then Christian compatibilists have some tough choices to make. They must abandon their compatibilism, embrace universalism, or reject some other element of standard Christian theology. After exploring the latter two options, Walls concludes that the best move for orthodox Christians is to reject theological compatibilism in favor of libertarianism.

Tamler Sommers responds to Walls, arguing that libertarianism should hold no special attraction to theists over compatibilism. He points out that even if we accept libertarianism, there appear to be biblical passages in which God determines people to do bad things and then blames them for doing these bad things, which is something that Walls argues a perfectly good being wouldn't do. Thus theistic libertarians face similar problems to those Walls poses for theistic compatibilists. Moreover, theistic libertarians have their own mystery to deal with, namely, libertarianism itself. It's a mystery, Sommers contends, how indeterminism helps give us the sort of free will necessary for robust, desert-entailing moral responsibility, and he describes libertarian accounts of indeterminism's contribution to free will as "obscure (and/or panicky)"

(p. 109). (This claim strikes me as overly dismissive of recent work on this issue, of which Sommers is certainly aware, by libertarians or those friendly to libertarianism.)

Derk Pereboom contends that, given incompatibilism, theists should prefer theological determinism to libertarianism. Accepting theological determinism will, given incompatibilism, require abandoning the idea of divine retribution for sins. But it provides “a strong notion of divine providence...according to which everything that happens...is exactly in accord with God’s providential will” (p. 114). This view of God’s ultimate and meticulous control over history can, in turn, provide great existential comfort to us by giving us the knowledge that even the most horrendous suffering is part of God’s perfect plan for creation. Pereboom, like Ekstrom, also raises concerns about the value of free will in response to the problem of evil. He contends that a version of skeptical theism that makes no appeal to human freedom provides a more promising response to the problem, especially when addressing truly horrendous evils.

Timothy O’Connor responds to Pereboom, arguing that incompatibilist theological determinism of the sort Pereboom advocates is at odds with various aspects of Christian theism. He argues that it implicates God in the most horrendous evils in a troubling way, and that it’s at odds with the religious practices of repentance and confession of sin, since these practices seem to presuppose both that the sinner is morally accountable and that she has a certain degree of freedom with respect to her future behavior. O’Connor also argues that theological determinism of the sort Pereboom advocates is inconsistent with Christian understandings of divine/human relationships, and that it raises grave difficulties for the doctrine of the incarnation.

Both T.J. Mawson and Helen Steward challenge the alleged connection between libertarianism and theism, albeit in importantly different ways. Mawson argues that theism itself doesn’t support libertarianism over compatibilism. The theist, he argues, can get all she wants

from either position. Compatibilists have responses to the logical problem of evil available to them, which is all they need qua theists. Steward, by contrast, contends that libertarianism—a version of it anyway—is “a respectable naturalistic position” (p. 170) and thus doesn’t require any theistic presuppositions. An interesting feature of Steward’s naturalistic libertarianism is that it regards agency itself, and not just *free* agency, as incompatible with determinism.

Meghan Griffith highlights a number of difficulties facing reductionist pictures that attempt to reduce our agency to appropriate causal relationships between certain mental states and events (e.g., beliefs, desires, intentions). She argues that these difficulties are especially pressing for theists, giving them reason to prefer a non-reductive, agent-causal picture of agency.

Michael Almeida challenges a widespread assumption that libertarianism is essential to an adequate response to the logical problem of evil. He also proposes a response to the problem that he contends works on both libertarian and compatibilist conceptions of free will. He concludes that there is a compelling response to the logical problem of evil “that does not depend on any particular concept of free will” (p. 197). If he’s right about that, it should be a particularly welcome conclusion for theists, given the widespread perception that libertarianism is untenable.

The essays by W. Matthews Grant and Neal Judisch both address threats seemingly posed to free will by specific doctrines about God’s relationship to the created order. Grant takes up the relationship between the doctrine of divine universal causality (the thesis that God directly causes everything distinct from himself) and libertarianism. On the surface, it seems that these two theses are inconsistent, since libertarianism entails that free actions cannot be causally determined by factors beyond the agent’s control. However, Grant contends that there is a plausible model of divine agency on which the doctrine of divine universal causality is consistent with free will as understood by libertarians. On this model, there is no factor that is both prior to

and logically sufficient for the human actions God causes. This is enough, Grant contends, to render the view consistent with libertarianism. Neal Judisch is concerned with a closely related threat to freedom seemingly posed by the doctrine of divine conservation. His goal is to show how free agency might be compatible with divine conservation without being compatible with theological determinism. On the view he proposes, God's conservation of all things is "reliably responsive" to the choices and actions of human agents, so that "God causes some physical events only because they concur with" the freely willed actions of God's creatures (p. 252).

Rebekah L. H. Rice takes up the question of how we are to understand God acting for reasons. It's common for theists to suppose that God acts for reasons. It's also common for them to assume an agent causal view of divine agency, according to God's agency involves irreducible agent/substance causation (irreducible in the sense that it can't be analyzed in terms of causation by states or events involving God, like God's mental states/events). Rice believes that these two assumptions are in tension. Either theists must give up on the agent causal view of divine agency, or they must accept that God doesn't act for reasons, thus making his actions capricious. Rice argues that theists should take the first horn of this dilemma; better, she contends, to understand divine agency in familiar event-causal terms. On this view, an event in God's life is among his actions if and only if it is caused in an appropriate way by relevant items in God's mental life.

Kevin Timpe addresses the relationship between God's character and his free agency. He argues that God, in his perfection, will always see the correct reasons for action and will always weigh those reasons appropriately and that this constrains what God can and cannot do. However, the fact that God's choices are constrained in this way is consistent with (though it doesn't require) a libertarian view of God's freedom. This is because, properly understood, libertarianism doesn't require that it be possible for free agents to do otherwise. It requires only

that the agent's behavior not be causally determined by factors external to the agent. Since God's character isn't something external to God and isn't causally determined by any external factors, the fact that God's choices are constrained by his character poses no threat to his freedom.

Jesse Couenhoven concludes the volume with a pair of proposals about how best to understand God's freedom and responsibility. Couenhoven proposes, first, that divine responsibility is best accounted for by non-volitionalist theories, "which do not think of responsibility as the result of an act of the will" (p. 296). His second proposal is that God's freedom be understood normatively. On this view, God's perfect freedom consists in his perfect orientation to the good. Couenhoven concludes by arguing that compatibilists are better situated to make sense of divine freedom and responsibility, despite the fact that "Both compatibilists and incompatibilists are capable of taking advantage of [his two] proposals" (p. 308).

Let me conclude with two relatively minor complaints about the volume. First, conspicuously absent from a collection of essays titled *Free Will & Theism* is any contribution addressing the relationship between human freedom and divine foreknowledge. Given the enduring interest in that topic, some readers will undoubtedly find the absence disappointing. Others, however, may see it as a refreshing change of pace in that it allows more room for exploration of less well-traveled philosophical terrain. I myself think there's a middle path to strike here. While the freedom/foreknowledge issue has certainly received its fair share of coverage (no doubt some would say it has received more than its fair share), there have been new developments on the topic in recent years, and it would have been nice to see at least one essay in a volume like this explicitly addressing those developments. This, it seems to me, is compatible with devoting more space to less widely discussed questions. The freedom/foreknowledge issue also has straightforward connections to the relationship between

theistic belief and a commitment to the libertarian view of free will. It is thus somewhat surprising that none of the essays in the volume take up that issue in any detail.

Also absent from the volume is any sustained discussion of free will and divine love for created beings. (Ekstrom does briefly address related issues in her essay, though only briefly.) It's sometimes said that true love requires free will. Whatever we might think of that claim, it's worth wondering whether loving a person requires not controlling that person in various ways and whether you can love someone if that person has acted so as to ensure your love. If loving someone does require not controlling the person in various ways, might this tell against theological determinism and in favor of a libertarian position? And if our loving God requires that God give us a genuine choice about whether to follow him, might this contribute to an explanation of the value of God granting us free will? At the very least, questions like these are relevant to the themes of the collection and ripe for deeper investigation than they are given.

As I say, these are comparatively minor complaints; there's only so much that can be done in one volume. On the whole Timpe and Speak have brought together an excellent collection of essays that undoubtedly advance our understanding of the relationship between positions on free will and theistic belief and practice. The volume will be of special interest to philosophers concerned with the problem of evil and other topics in the philosophy of religion that engage the issue of free will (e.g., divine agency, providence, and conservation). But it will also be of interest to philosophers who have no special interest in the philosophy of religion but who are interested in free will, as several of the essays address, directly or indirectly, topics relevant to an assessment of various positions in the free will debate, libertarianism in particular.