

The Best Thing in Life is Free

The Compatibility of God's Freedom and His Essential Moral Perfection*

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Abstract

A number of scholars have claimed that, on the assumption of incompatibilism, there is a conflict between God's freedom and God's essential moral perfection. Jesse Couenhoven is one such example; Couenhoven, a compatibilist, thinks that libertarian views of divine freedom are problematic given God's essential moral perfection. He writes, "libertarian accounts of God's freedom quickly run into a conceptual problem: their focus on contingent choices undermines their ability to celebrate divine freedom with regard to the essential divine nature. For an Augustinian [i.e., a compatibilist], by contrast, God's freedom is not at odds with the necessities of perfect love but fulfilled by it."¹ Others who argue for similar conclusions include William Rowe and Wes Morriston. Michael Bergmann and Jan Cover have recently argued that divine responsibility and moral perfection are compatible with the absence of divine freedom. In this paper, I argue that the arguments which hold that divine freedom conflicts with essential divine moral perfection fail. I develop an account of divine freedom which not only doesn't conflict with God's essential moral goodness but shows that such goodness is a necessary part of perfected freedom. I then show how this understanding of free will takes away a major motivation for Bergmann and Cover's apparent willingness to reject divine freedom.

1 Introduction

Arguments which aim to pit one divine attribute against another are not new. Sometimes, said arguments are used to argue against the existence of God. Such an argument might be understood to have the following form, where x and y stand for purported divine attributes:

1. God, if he exists, is essentially x .
2. God, if he exists, is essentially y .
3. Being x is incompatible with being y .
4. Therefore, God doesn't exist.

*Credit for the title goes to Jon Jacobs.

¹Couenhoven (2012), 409.

Other times, the point of this general kind of argument pitting one divine attribute against another is not to show that God doesn't exist, but rather to argue against a particular understanding of one (or more) of the attributes in question. Here, we might think of the form as follows, where again x and y stand for divine attributes and F and G stand for particular accounts or understandings of a divine attribute:

1. God is essentially x .
2. God is essentially y .
3. Being Fx is incompatible with being y .
4. \therefore God is not Fx .

When coupled with a premise of the following form

5. God is either Fx or Gx .

we get an argument for the conclusion that

6. \therefore God is Gx .

My interest in the present paper is with the second of these argument forms. More specifically, I'm interested in a number of arguments which claim that there is an incompatibility between God's being essentially morally perfect and His being free when that freedom is understood in a libertarian way.² Given that God is free, these arguments are thus arguments for God's being free as understood by the compatibilist. My goal here then is to show that there's no conflict between God's freedom and God's essential moral perfection, even if incompatibilism is true. This of course doesn't function as an argument *for* incompatibilism.³ I merely hope to show that considerations of divine freedom don't give us any further reason for preferring compatibilism over incompatibilism. In sections 2 and 3, I consider recent work by Jesse Couenhoven and Wes Morriston, both of whom argue that divine freedom conflicts with essential divine moral perfection, on the assumption of incompatibilism, fail. I think their arguments fail; I develop an account of divine freedom which not only doesn't conflict with God's essential moral goodness, but shows that such goodness is a necessary part of perfected freedom. In section 4 I then consider an argument by Michael Bergmann and Jan Cover which develops an account of divine responsibility and moral perfection which is compatible with the absence of divine freedom. I show how my preferred account of divine freedom takes away the primary motivation for Bergmann and Cover's willingness to reject divine freedom.

2 Couenhoven

I think that some of the best recent work on divine freedom, and some of the most under-appreciated by theists working on issues in the free will

²One might be tempted to talk about God 'having libertarian free will'; for an argument against such language, see van Inwagen (2008).

³My arguments for incompatibilism can be found in Timpe (2012).

debate, comes from Jesse Couenhoven. In a recent paper, Couenhoven argues that “Christians have significant theological reasons to accept freedom that need not be correlated with having choices. . . . My thesis is that those who worship the triune God and praise the sinless perfection of Christ and the heavenly saints have reason to accept a ‘normative’ conception of freedom, according to which certain kinds of necessity are not merely compatible with perfect freedom but intrinsic to it.”⁴ I agree with both of these statements by Couenhoven. But he further thinks that these statements give one reason to reject libertarian views of God’s freedom, thus putting pressure on libertarian views of human freedom as well. I think that one can—and should—adopt a normative approach to freedom and yet hold onto incompatibilism. My aim in this section is to show why a normative approach to freedom—one that I think makes sense of essential divine moral perfection—is compatible with incompatibilism. A lesser goal, and one which I’ll only touch on in passing, will be to point out how my primary aim also has the implication that we should reject that human freedom and responsibility always requires the ability to do otherwise as well. As Thomas Talbott notes in a related context, “what is at stake here, of course, is how one should conceive of divine freedom and, more generally, how one should conceive of the freedom of any agent.”⁵ I think this is true. If God’s freedom should be understood along incompatibilist lines, that gives one a reason, though certainly a defeasible reason, for preferring an incompatibilist account of human freedom as well.

Unlike some other forms of incompatibilism, I think that this normative conception of freedom means we do have to give up the incompatibility between freedom and all forms of necessity. Couenhoven appeals to Augustine’s *Unfinished Work* to make this point:

If, then, you say that the will cannot be attributed to necessity, even this is not universally true. For . . . there is even a certain blessed necessity, because it is necessary that God always lives both immutably and most happily. But since there are also certain necessities so foreign to the will that there is necessity where there is no will and that there is will where there is no necessity, the statement is at least partially true that the will cannot be attributed to necessity.⁶

I agree that there are certain kinds of necessity that are compatible with freedom, and I don’t even think that one needs to go very far to see this. (See, for example, Dennett’s well-known case involving Luther.⁷)

Following Augustine, Couenhoven takes ‘the will’ to be more normatively loaded than do many in the contemporary philosophical debates about free will. As he sees it, the will “implies for him what we call wishes, desires, and attachments—though we must keep in mind that Augustine thinks of these goods as deeply rational, in the sense that desiring a thing implies believing that it is good, and while desires can be foolish,

⁴Couenhoven (2012), 396.

⁵Talbott (1988), f.

⁶As quoted in Couenhoven (2012), 398.

⁷Dennett (1984), 133. See also the discussions in Pawl and Timpe (2009) and Pawl and Timpe (2013).

they are never without their reasons.”⁸ Given the role that reasons play in what we freely choose to do, a perfect being who perfectly understands and is sensitive to reasons, place limits on how God is able to exercise his agency: “Just as God cannot make a round square or a rock too heavy for the Trinity to lift, because being ‘constrained’ by reason is a higher kind of ability and power than being ‘unlimited’ by it, so divine freedom expresses itself in an ‘inability’ to sin.”⁹ It should be clear that both Couenhoven and Augustine do not think that God needs to have what Alvin Plantinga calls significant freedom in order to be free:

if only that one is free which is able to will two things, that is, good and evil, God is not free, since he cannot will evil . . . are you going to praise God in such a way that you take away his freedom? Or should you not rather understand that there is a certain blessed necessity by which God cannot be unjust?”¹⁰

As Plantinga defines significant freedom, a person has significant free will only if that individual is “free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him”¹¹ where an action is morally significant for a person at a given time “if it would be wrong for him to perform the action then but right to refrain, or vice versa.”¹² So understood, a person is significantly free with respect to an action only if either the performance of that action or refraining from performing that action is morally wrong, and the person is free to act or to refrain from acting. It is easy to see why this kind of freedom would be problematic for an essentially morally perfect being. Couenhoven thinks that lacking significant freedom doesn’t limit or diminish God’s freedom, but rather enhances and perfects it. The necessity of tracking and responding to the best reasons is entailed by God’s perfected nature. But these are not external constraints on God, imposed by another agent or the atemporal analogue of the past and the laws of nature: “God remains sovereign, because God’s necessities are not compelled but natural in that they are implications of God’s perfection in being and expressing that love which God embodies and enacts.”¹³

So, following Augustine (and others), Couenhoven sees free will not a neutral capacity, but rather as oriented toward the good (or, more accurately, the perceived good; but of course in the case of God’s freedom, the two don’t come apart). Couenhoven writes,

normative freedom is perfect when a person is fully perceptive and wholehearted, in that a person can see what is good, love it well, and pursue it. Such liberty is not only compatible with but implies certain kinds of necessity: perfection has a definite logic and structure without constraining or binding. At the same time, perfect and perfected beings are not puppets; they act out of their own agential powers, for their own reasons.¹⁴

⁸Couenhoven (2010), 112.

⁹Couenhoven (2012), 400.

¹⁰Augustine as quoted in Couenhoven (2012), 401.

¹¹Plantinga (1974), 166.

¹²Plantinga (1974), 166.

¹³Couenhoven (2012), 401f.

¹⁴Couenhoven (2012), 402.

He further describes normative freedom as follows:

This freedom is ‘asymmetrical’ in that it is a capacity for good, but an incapacity for evil. As Augustine puts the point in a sermon, ‘only the just are really free’. Supremely free persons are so virtuous they cannot be otherwise—they live a life of wisdom that has as its flip side the incapacity to be anything other than very good. They may sometimes make undetermined choices but that is no necessary part of their freedom.¹⁵

I agree with Couenhoven that such a normative conception of freedom is attractive and should play a more central role in our collective thinking about free will. Where I disagree is in that I don’t see anything in such a view that is problematic for the incompatibilist. He contrasts a normative conception of freedom with a libertarian conception as “two general views” with an eye toward seeing which of them is “more adequate.”¹⁶ But why think that the libertarian can’t endorse a normative conception of freedom?

Elsewhere, I’ve argued for an account of free will that is incompatible with the truth of determinism, but constrains the options an agent is capable of choosing based on the motivational reasons she recognizes for those various options. My preferred understanding of free will is a form of what Dean Zimmerman calls ‘virtue libertarianism’ and gives a large role to the agent’s moral character. Consider the following:

Libertarians think that, if all of our choices were determined by prior states of the universe, or divinely determined by God, we would never freely choose to act in one way rather than another. For us, at least, the ‘base case’ of a free action must be one in which the choice so to act was the outcome of an indeterministic process. The reason libertarians care about whether free choices of this sort occur is not that they think that such choices are always important, in and of themselves. Free choices between trivial alternatives would not be very valuable. Even free choices between momentous alternatives can seem insignificant, in the larger scheme of things, if they have no connection with the formation of character. Imagine a free agent, torn between noble and base desires, sometimes freely choosing the good, sometimes the bad. And suppose further that a good or bad choice never makes it easier to choose the good or the bad on further trials. The agent may be choosing freely on each occasion, but she cannot undergo anything like moral growth—if her character improves or declines, the change is not due to the normal sort of moral improvement or deterioration for which we often praise and blame one another. Freedom is needed primarily as a necessary condition for other moral goods. The highest such good is the very possibility of creatures capable of displaying moral virtues—hard-won habits due, at least in part, to a lifetime of free choices.

¹⁵Couenhoven (2012), 403.

¹⁶Couenhoven (2012), 403.

Choices made because of a genuinely moral virtue (as opposed to a merely excellent disposition) redound to the credit of the agent even when the virtue is so ingrained to make the choice, now, inevitable. Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for choices rendered inevitable by vices. Strictly speaking, such choices and action are not freely taken—i.e. they are not examples of the base case of indeterministic, free choosing. Still, if an agent is an uncoerced expression of character traits for which one is responsible, the action is one for which we should hold a person responsible. We might even want to say that such actions and choices are ‘freely undertaken’ in the sense that they are the expression of a character formed by a history of freely chosen action, despite the fact that the agents no longer have a choice about their behavior in these circumstances. Still, libertarians will think actions free in this broader sense could not occur without, somewhere down the line, free choices in the narrower sense—instances of the base case of freedom, requiring indeterministic circumstances Instances of the base case of free choice are valuable primarily because each one plays a small role in making long-term moral growth a possibility for creatures like us.¹⁷

This understanding of freedom not only gets you incompatibilism, but it also highlights the central role that an agent’s moral character plays in what she is able to freely do (which is where, as I see it, the normativity comes in). Insofar as this view is an incompatibilist one, it requires that an agent not be determined by anything outside of her volitional structure when she’s acting freely and responsibly (given that free will is necessary for moral responsibility). On this view, a human agent who never had the ability to do otherwise because her actions and choices were determined entirely by factors outside her control—either by the conjunction of the past and the laws of nature, or by God, or some other agent—would neither be free nor morally responsible. However, I think it is false that an agent needs to have had alternative possibilities at the moment of a choice for which she is morally responsible, if the reason why she lacks the ability to do otherwise can be traced back to her moral character.¹⁸

Most contemporary accounts of free will, both compatibilist and incompatibilist, permit the possibility of tracing. Manuel Vargas defines tracing as follows: ‘tracing is the idea that responsibility for some outcome need not be anchored in the agent or agent’s action at the moment immediately prior to [the] outcome, but rather at some suitable time prior to the moment of deliberation or action.’¹⁹ Though he puts it here in terms of moral responsibility, freedom (as the control condition on moral responsibility) can also be traced back in much the same manner. One of the most common examples of tracing, that of the drunk driver, illustrates this. The drunk driver controls her actions in the way require for

¹⁷Zimmerman (2012), 176f.

¹⁸For further argument that free will, even as understood by the libertarian, need not require alternative possibilities at the time of the purported free choice, see ?, particularly chapter 9.

¹⁹Vargas (2005), 269.

her being morally responsible at the time of her drunk driving, even if she couldn't have driven any better at that time given her level of inebriation, so long as she controlled her becoming that inebriated.

Remember Zimmerman's claim from above about virtue libertarianism: "Libertarians think that, if all of our choices were determined by prior states of the universe, or divinely determined by [an outside agent like] God, we would never freely choose to act in one way rather than another. For us, at least, the 'base case' of a free action must be one in which the choice so to act was the outcome of an indeterministic process."²⁰ These 'base cases' are those that other freely performed actions are traced back to. But also note that Zimmerman's claims about what such a base case must be like are met in the case of God's volitions.

To his credit, Couenhoven distances his account of divine freedom from God's being determined by anything outside of himself: "perfect freedom is [not] associated with causal determinism: because God is prime mover, it would be laughable to think of God as being determined in that sense. God cannot be forced, compelled or prohibited."²¹ The kind of necessity involved with normative freedom is being determined—I'd prefer 'necessitated', which I see as the larger genus—by one's nature. Those whose character or nature allows them to see the evil as good and vice versa are able to do such things. For example, those on the cornice of the gluttons in Dante's *Purgatorio* can choose to stare at fruit at the expense of climbing further up the mountain and encountering God precisely because they are still gluttonous. In considering James Sennett's view, which is in many ways similar to my own, Couenhoven says that "libertarian accounts put traditional views of heaven (and union with Christ) in the awkward position of eliminating a great good—freedom of choice—from the lives of the saints."²² But as Tim Pawl and I have argued in a number of places, the libertarian need not think that the redeemed, or those with perfected moral characters more generally, lack this great good. On the view we've developed, "earthly and heavenly freedom are not in tension but in continuity,"²³ nor does our view imply "the end of responsibility"²⁴ any more than does Couenhoven's. And our view certainly doesn't lead to "the rejection of a traditional conception of heavenly perfection"²⁵ as he says that consistent libertarian views do.

Couenhoven also considers the freedom of Christ and argues that it too supports a normative conception of freedom, as opposed to a libertarian one. I do not have time to address this issue directly, though the general line of argument that I'd pursue should be clear enough from my previous

²⁰Zimmerman (2012), 176.

²¹Couenhoven (2012), 403.

²²Couenhoven (2012), 405. It's not clear that my view has the drawbacks the Couenhoven attributes to James Sennett's view, which is similar in a number of ways to the one that I (along with Tim Pawl) have developed. Couenhoven says that Sennett's view "seems arbitrary" in that God perfects (through proximate determination) the freedom of the redeemed, but not those on earth. For why this criticism doesn't cut against our view, even if it does against Sennett's, see Pawl and Timpe (2009).

²³Couenhoven (2012), 405.

²⁴Couenhoven (2012), 406.

²⁵Couenhoven (2012), 406.

work.²⁶ Especially when one considers that normative and libertarian conceptions are not mutually exclusive, I don't see Christ's freedom as putting any further pressure on such a view.

So while I agree with Couenhoeven that we should understand divine freedom to be inherently normative, I don't see this to give a comparative advantage to compatibilist views over incompatibilist views. Insofar as there can be normative libertarian views as well as normative compatibilist views, the mere recognition that divine freedom should be understood normatively doesn't by itself give us a reason to endorse compatibilism. Granted, there may be other arguments against incompatibilist views of free will that would give comparative advantage to compatibilist views, but that argumentative strategy strikes me as quite different than what Couenhoven is pursuing here.

3 Morriston²⁷

Wes Morriston also makes an argument for why we should understand divine freedom along compatibilist lines. Morriston argues that there is a tension between the free will defense (on the assumption of incompatibilism) and the claim that God is essentially good: "If moral freedom is such a great good in human beings, why is it not a grave defect in God that he lacks it? And if the lack of moral freedom does not detract in any way from God's greatness, would it not have been better for us not to have it?"²⁸ By "moral freedom" Morriston means the "the freedom to choose between good and evil alternatives."²⁹ There is a lot in his paper that I think is worth careful scrutiny, but for present purposes I want to focus on a thought experiment he gives related to the larger themes of this chapter. Morriston asked us to consider

two groups of finite persons, group alpha and group beta. The members of both groups, the alphas and the betas, as I shall call them, are naturally good, good in a way that makes it impossible for them to choose evil. What makes them different is that the alpha were made to exist by something outside of themselves (a favourable heredity and environment, a benevolent God, or whatever), whereas the betas were not made by anything at all—they simply happened to come into existence.³⁰

Morriston thinks it clear that it would be "absurd" or "unreasonable to treat members of the two groups differently, bestowing moral praise on the betas, but not on the alphas."³¹ A few pages later, he asks (and answers) the following question:

²⁶See, in particular, Pawl and Timpe (2009), Pawl and Timpe (2013), and Timpe (2013).

²⁷This section is adapted largely from chapter 7 of Timpe (2013).

²⁸Morrison (2000), 344.

²⁹Morrison (2003), 441.

³⁰Morrison (2000), 350.

³¹Morrison (2000), 350.

Does the presence or absence of a creator who made me with this good nature make a difference to whether I am morally responsible for the good deeds that flow from it? I do not see that it does.³²

In one sense, I agree with Morrision. I think that our judgments about the alphas and our judgments about the betas should be the same. The mere presence or absence of a creator is here irrelevant.³³ But unlike Morrision, I think we should judge that both groups fail to be moral agents. Whether or not the agents in question are moral agents isn't settled by whether or not they were created. The issue, rather, is whether or not the agents have the right kind of history to be morally responsible agents. On the virtue libertarianism sketched earlier, neither the alphas nor the betas have the kind of history needed for them to be morally responsible agents.

Compare both the alphas and the betas with the gammas. The gammas are another group of finite persons who, like the alphas and betas, are now such that it is impossible for them to choose evil. Like the alphas, the gammas were created; but like the betas (and unlike the alphas), they were not created such that they were initially unable to choose evil. With respect to how they are now—that is, their present time-slices—the gammas may be no different than the alphas. But if the considerations I've given about virtue libertarianism and the connection between an agent's moral character and her choices are true, then what is relevant to whether or not a creature is morally responsible for her action at the present time is not just how she is. Depending on how she came to be the way she is, an agent could fail to have any motivational reasons for choosing to *X* and yet still freely choose to not-*X*. So gammas can be free in choosing to do some good action even though they're not (currently) free to choose to not do that free action. So if one is a historicist about freedom and responsibility—as I think one should be—then whether or not an agent is free will depend on *how the agent came to be* the way she is, not just *how she is*. That is, to return to our comparison of the different types of agents, whether or not an agent is free will depend on whether the agent is an alpha or a beta or a gamma.³⁴

According to Morrision, what is needed “is a rationale for saying that moral freedom is required for moral goodness in human beings, but not for moral goodness in their Creator.”³⁵ Such a rationale requires, he thinks, articulating a view that satisfies the following four desiderata:

1. Human beings are both morally responsible and morally free.
2. In human beings, moral responsibility does presuppose moral freedom.³⁶

³²Morrision (2000), 353.

³³Like Morrision, I think that even if it's impossible for betas to exist, some counterpossibles are non-vacuously true. See Zagzebski (1990).

³⁴For a further discussion of the particular role that reasons play in how our character shapes what we freely do, see Timpe (2013), chapter 2.

³⁵Morrision (2000), 347.

³⁶'Moral freedom', as Morrision is using the term, can be understood for present purposes as synonymous with Plantinga's use of 'significant freedom'.

3. God, on the other hand, is not morally free; his nature is such that He cannot choose between good and evil.
4. Nevertheless, God is morally responsible for his actions and is perfectly good in the distinctively moral sense.

I've already argued that being morally responsible for X at t does not require significant freedom regarding X at t . I think the same thing holds for moral freedom on Morrision's use of the term. The redeemed in heaven, for example, could be morally praiseworthy for their worshipping of God despite not being able, given their present moral character, to choose to rebel against God. For created agents, so long as the reason that an agent lacks the ability to choose evil at t is explained by earlier freely chosen actions, the mere fact that she lacks the ability to choose evil doesn't entail that she's neither morally responsible nor morally good. Given that creatures have their moral character accidentally, it is the historicism that allows creatures to develop their characters in such a way that they can be morally responsible at t even if they lack moral freedom as defined by Morrision at t .³⁷ Given my incompatibilism, I think that if God (or any other agent) created an agent with a specific character which determined that she did particular actions, she would be neither free nor responsible in performing those actions. It is for this reason that Morrision's alphas fail to be free in the sense required for moral responsibility.

With the above considerations in mind, I turn then towards divine freedom. Elsewhere, Morrision raises the following related dilemma:

Is choosing to do what one knows to be evil a genuine exercise of power? Or is the ability to make evil choices better characterized as a 'liability' to 'fall short' of one's proper good?... I argued that both alternatives have implications that are unpalatable to most contemporary 'Anselmians'. If the ability to make evil choices is a bona fide active power, then an omnipotent being would necessarily have this power (even if it chooses never to exercise it). This is unacceptable to Anselmians, since it is inconsistent with the supposed necessity of God's moral perfection. But if, on the other hand, the 'ability' to choose evil is a mere 'liability' to fail in what one is trying for, then moral freedom—i.e. the freedom to choose between good and evil alternatives—is quite a bad thing.³⁸

By 'Anselmians', Morrision means those who endorse perfect being theology, and not simply those who endorse particular claims about God's nature that Anselm makes. In this sense, I qualify as an Anselmian here.

The primary goal of this section is to show why, even if moral freedom is required for free will and moral responsibility in created agents, it is not required for God to be free and responsible. As Tim Mawson notes, responding to Morrision's dilemma involves "explaining why one and the same ability (to be less than morally perfect) can be a power for us even

³⁷I thus also disagree with Thomas Talbott's definition of free will in Talbott (1988).

³⁸Morrision (2003), 441

though it would be a liability for the most powerful being that is logically possible—God.”³⁹

One implication of the virtue libertarianism discussed earlier is that a free agent can freely will to X even if it is not psychologically possible for her, given her moral character, to choose not- X . Moral freedom for creaturely agents is a necessary condition for creatures to freely form a moral character. The goal of forming our character is that we would form it in such a way that evil choices are no longer possible for us given our current moral character. This requires that we have moral freedom at some point in our history. But moral freedom isn’t necessary for God for the same reason.⁴⁰ In thinking about whether or not God has the ability to choose to do evil, Augustine writes that “if only that one is free which is able to will two things, that is, good and evil, God is not free, since he cannot will evil.”⁴¹ But Augustine clearly thinks that God is free, so as we’ve already seen he thinks that it is false that only those agents that are able to will good and evil are free. I think it is false that a self-existing being such as God requires moral freedom in order to be free, thereby, like Augustine, rejecting the antecedent of the conditional above. God need not have moral freedom in order to be free and responsible since God doesn’t have his moral character contingently. He’s not just perfectly morally good, but essentially perfectly morally good. So moral freedom isn’t instrumentally valuable in the same way for God as it is for creatures. Given the radical ontological difference between God and creature, it shouldn’t be surprising that God’s freedom is different from creaturely freedom at this point. But God’s not an alpha.⁴² He’s not made to have his moral character. Neither is God, however, a beta—his moral character isn’t something that He just happens to have. God’s moral character is guaranteed precisely by his being essentially morally perfect. As such, it is impossible for God to desire to do a morally bad action or use His free will for something other than the good. None of the reasons for which free creatures have moral freedom is a reason for God to have moral freedom. God has free will (that is, He’s free with respect to performing morally good actions) even if He never has moral freedom and the ability to do evil.

God’s choices, however, are done for reasons.⁴³ That is, there are reasons that motivate why it is that God chooses to do those things that He does. Given God’s perfection, God’s motivational reasons will always perfectly track the normative reasons that exist. I think there are, in general, three ways that an agent might fail to choose to do X according to the relevant normative reasons that there are for X -ing. First, the agent might be unaware of the relevant normative reasons. Second, the agent might weigh the normative reasons for X -ing improperly with the

³⁹Mawson (2005), 56.

⁴⁰For a similar view, see Senor (2008).

⁴¹“Unfinished Work,” I.100.

⁴²Per Revelation 22:13, God is the Alpha (and the Omega); but being *the* Alpha does not an alpha make.

⁴³This is something that Bergmann and Cover, discussed in the next section, also accept: “God’s acts that aren’t significantly free are, nevertheless, performed for the right reasons” (Bergmann and Cover (2006), 403).

normative reasons for not *X*-ing (or for doing some other action *Y*, such that doing *X* and *Y* are contrary). Third, the agent might simply be weak-willed and unable to bring herself to will to *X* despite knowing and properly ranking the normative reasons for *X*-ing. But none of these three possibilities are relevant to the case involving God. God, being necessarily omniscient, is necessarily aware of all the normative reasons for acting in certain ways. Necessarily, God will not fail to weight the normative reasons properly. And necessarily God will not perform an action (or fail to perform on action) that He judges it would be wrong for Him, all things considered, to perform (or not to perform). So in God we see the perfection of rational agency. As Even Fales writes,

God is a perfectly rational agent, and He is so out of logical, or metaphysical necessity. Thus his train of thought, when He reasons, embodies perfectly the good-reasons relation . . . and is, moreover, not constrained by any causal laws. Since God is also omnipotent and omnibenevolent, there is no distinction in Him between moral and prudential reasoning. Since God necessarily arrives at the correct conclusion in any deliberation, and necessarily does not suffer from weakness of the will, He necessarily does what is morally best (if anything)—and performs each such action with perfect freedom.⁴⁴

We need not think that God reasons discursively to think He acts for reasons. Given God's perfection, His motivational reasons and free choice necessarily track the realm of normative reasons. God always does what is best despite being free.

So God doesn't need to have moral freedom (that is, the ability to choose between good and evil alternatives) in order to be free and responsible. However, an even stronger claim can be made. Mawson argues that God's having moral freedom would be a liability, since it would involve Him having the ability to do that which is less than perfectly good:

To ask the question whether God would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an action which is less than that demanded by perfect goodness is to ask whether He would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an action which, of necessity, there is good reason for Him not to perform (it is less than that demanded by perfect goodness—He has more reason to perform that action which is demanded by perfect goodness instead), and which—being omnipotent—He

⁴⁴Fales (1994), 82. One might reject this picture on the grounds that God doesn't reason discursively about normative reasons. But as Fales notes, the account above doesn't require that He does:

God does act for reasons, and in accord with His reasons. It does not matter whether God must engage in discursive reasoning in order to see that a certain action ought to be performed, or whether, as we believe, He just sees this immediately. In either case, He sees that the action is wanted because the [normative] reasons dictate it, and in this way His choosing embodies the crucial good-reasons connection that lies at the heart of the above analysis of freedom (Fales (1994), 83).

It need not be the case that God reasons discursively for Him to act for reasons.

need not perform in order to bring about any other state of affairs He might want to bring about. In other words, it is to ask whether He would be more powerful if He had the ability to perform an overall unreasonable action. To answer this question ‘No’ seems, then, obviously right. Such an ability would always be a liability for Him; it could never be a power.⁴⁵

I see no reason to think one should intrinsically value moral freedom (freedom-involving-the-ability-to-sin) over freedom-minus-ability-to-sin. As argued earlier, human agents need the former precisely in order to develop the latter; but once we develop the latter, the former is no longer valuable in and of itself. And given that God doesn’t need the former to develop the latter, God has no need for moral freedom. And having such an ability, Mawson claims, would detract from his perfection.

4 Bergmann and Cover

Michael Bergmann and Jan Cover consider an argument that God’s essential moral perfection and God’s being thankworthy⁴⁶ for the good actions he performs are contradictory. The argument, which they call the ‘Incoherence Argument’, runs as follows:

1. $G \rightarrow \neg F$ (God’s being essentially perfectly good prevents God’s good acts from being free.)
2. $\neg F \rightarrow \neg T$ (God isn’t thankworthy for an act that wasn’t performed freely.)
3. $\therefore G \rightarrow \neg T$
4. $\therefore \neg(G \ \& \ T)$ ⁴⁷

Bergmann and Cover’s primary objective in this article is to develop a response to the Incoherence Argument which rejects premise 2, which they call ‘*Not-Thankworthy*’. But they also consider two ways that one might reject premise 1, which they call ‘*No-Freedom*’. Their own preferred response to the Incoherence Argument is meant to be compatible with the truth of *No-Freedom*, or with its falsity. That is, they’ve attempted to preserve divine responsibility (more specifically, divine thankworthiness) even if God lacks free will. They call this claim, ‘*Responsible-Though-Good*’:

God can be *responsible* for the good acts he performs even if he is essentially perfectly free.

Bergmann and Cover make it clear that they are working with an incompatibilist understanding of both freedom and responsibility.⁴⁸ And it’s not only divine freedom that they think isn’t required for responsibility:

⁴⁵Mawson (2005), 66

⁴⁶Thankworthiness as used here is a species of moral responsibility, as the article makes clear. See Bergmann and Cover (2006), 383.

⁴⁷Bergmann and Cover (2006), 381f.

⁴⁸See Bergmann and Cover (2006), 383.

“A parallel point can also be made for non divine agents, namely, that there can be human responsibility without human freedom—though for different reason”⁴⁹

Bergmann and Cover also consider, in addition to *No-Freedom*, *No-Significant-Freedom*:

($G \rightarrow \neg F_S$) God’s being essentially perfectly good prevents God’s good acts from being *significantly* free.⁵⁰

Here, they are building off of Alvin Plantinga’s definition of significant freedom, mentioned earlier. But I don’t think significant freedom is intrinsically valuable, either for God or for creatures.⁵¹ I think, for example, that the redeemed in heaven lack significant freedom and that God lacks it as well. An essentially omnibenevolent God is, by definition, unable to have morally significant freedom in Plantinga’s sense. And I see no reason to insist that the redeemed will have a kind of freedom that God does not have, particularly when the having of that freedom indicates a fault in the moral character of the agent who has it.

Their own response to the Incoherence Argument is to argue sidestep the issue of *No-Freedom* and argue against *Not-Thankworthy*. They do this by arguing, as indicated above, that God’s being essentially perfectly good “is consistent with his being responsible for an act performed for the right reasons; and second, that . . . being responsible for an act performed for the right reasons is sufficient for his being thank worthy.”⁵² Since my interest here is with responsibility (and with free will as the control condition on moral responsibility) rather than thankworthiness in particular, I will ignore the second of these steps for present purposes.

In arguing for the claim that God can be responsible for the good acts He performs even if He is essentially perfectly good, Bergmann and Cover suggest that “proponents of The Incoherence Argument suspect that God is necessarily determined—forced, somehow—by his nature to perform the good acts he performs.”⁵³ The past few decades of the compatibilism/incompatibilism debate should have taught us to be very careful of equating determinism with force or compulsion.⁵⁴ But even leaving aside

⁴⁹Bergmann and Cover (2006), 404 note 3. In support of this claim, they reference an earlier paper by Bergmann developing a Molinist-inspired Frankfurt-style counterexample; see Bergmann (2002). In that paper, Bergmann suggests there that “perhaps there are two incompatibilist notions of freedom: one that goes with responsibility and one that goes with ability to do otherwise” (Bergmann (2002), 473). He then goes on to assume that the “ability to do otherwise *is* necessary for freedom” (Bergmann (2002), 473), though not for responsibility. It is unclear which understanding of free will Bergmann and Cover are adopting in their joint paper. Elsewhere, I’ve argued that ultimately these two notions cannot be fully separated; see Timpe (2012), particularly chapter 9.

⁵⁰Bergmann and Cover (2006) 386

⁵¹See, for example, Timpe (2013), particularly chapters 6 and 7. There may be reasons to withdraw the claim that ‘significant freedom is not intrinsically valuable’ if the arguments in Davison (2012) are correct. However, in that case I could weaken the above claim to say that significant freedom is not so intrinsically valuable as to always be desired given the kinds of actions that it makes possible.

⁵²Bergmann and Cover (2006), 392.

⁵³Bergmann and Cover (2006), 392.

⁵⁴See, for example, Kane (2005), chapter 2.

that caution, what is it that God is presumably being determined by in performing some action? His nature. The proponent of divine simplicity will find this perplexing, given that she thinks there is no real distinction between God and God's nature. However, I find quite plausible one of their central claims: "that God can be responsible for the good acts he performs even if he is essentially perfectly good."⁵⁵ But it should be clear from the above why I think that this is consistent with God's still being free.⁵⁶ Yet even here, I don't think that my own view is as distinct from Bergmann and Cover's as it might initially seem. In responding to an objection from William Rowe, Bergmann and Cover make it clear that where they differ from Rowe's understanding of agent-causation is that Rowe accepts that X's agent-causing an event e requires that "X had the power to refrain from bringing about e "⁵⁷ while Bergmann and Cover instead think that agent-causing requires that "nothing distinct from X (not even X's character) caused X to exert its power to bring about e ."⁵⁸ Given that I'm inclined to accept the doctrine of divine simplicity, I don't see God's character as distinct from God, so I don't see the parenthetical insertion as relevant. Their disagreement with Rowe about the nature of agent-causation further suggests that Bergmann and Cover are thinking of free will as (or essentially involving) the ability to do otherwise, rather than as the control condition on moral responsibility. I've argued, I think fairly extensively, in favor of the latter approach. And I've already argued above that free will, of the kind required for moral responsibility, doesn't require Plantingian significant freedom. Why think that the mere inability to refrain from bringing about e is sufficient for the lack of responsibility with regard to e 's occurrence? As Bergmann and Cover note, "It is implausible at worst and unsatisfying at best, given our knowledge that X caused the bringing about of e by exerting its power to do so and without being caused to exert this power by anything distinct from itself."⁵⁹

5 Conclusion

I've considered two arguments for the claim that divine freedom should be understood in a compatibilist manner, and argued that neither argument gives us a reason to prefer a compatibilist account of divine freedom to an incompatibilist account. I've then showed how this line of argument takes away the motivation that leads Bergmann and Cover to reject divine freedom. I see no reason to think there is a contradiction between God's essential moral perfection and His being free. While there are some choices that God, given His moral character, is unable to make, it is His own perfect nature which prevents Him from doing so. But this is a claim

⁵⁵Bergmann and Cover (2006), 397

⁵⁶To be clear, Bergmann and Cover do not suggest that God's responsibility is incompatible with God's being free; rather, their primary aim is to preserve divine responsibility in a way that doesn't require divine freedom.

⁵⁷Rowe (2000), 427

⁵⁸Bergmann and Cover (2006), 393

⁵⁹Bergmann and Cover (2006), 398.

which the virtue libertarian can endorse and defend.⁶⁰

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