

Guillaume Bignon. *Excusing Sinner and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2018. 241 pp. \$31.00 (paper).

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Issues surrounding free will and responsibility are hotly debated in contemporary philosophical theology. The classical theological/philosophical conundrum of free will still generates much heat among theologians and philosophers, no doubt because of its central role in the identity of different Christian denominations. One would think that all the possible avenues in the debate had already been explored. This, however, would be a premature conclusion: new arguments and positions pop up all the time. Many Christian philosophers defend traditional leeway libertarian views, especially versions of agent causation, whereas traditional Calvinist and Lutheran compatibilist reject such views. Relatively novel views, such as source incompatibilism, have been introduced to bridge the gap between the warring parties.

Into this complex debate comes French analytic philosopher Guillaume Bignon with his book *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* (henceforth ESBG). Bignon aims to defend two central Calvinist theses: (1) that moral responsibility is compatible with theological determinism and (2) that theological determinism does not make God morally responsible for sin or the immoral actions of humans, that is, God's goodness and His determining evil human actions are compatible. Correspondingly, ESBG consists of two parts. In the first part, Bignon first dismantles a number of popular misconceptions about theological determinism and moral responsibility. These include the claim that theological determinism entails coercion or mental illness. He then proceeds to analyse the main reasons why one would think that moral responsibility and theological determinism are not compatible, namely, manipulation arguments and the consequence argument (and the principle of alternate possibilities, PAP).

After showing why these arguments fail to produce the incompatibilist conclusion, he goes on the attack and offers a number of theological arguments against PAP, including an argument invoking the praiseworthiness of God. The discussion on PAP and the consequence argument takes almost half of the book (more than 100 pages!). Here Bignon engages with the philosophical debate quite deeply and presents some interesting criticisms, which I will highlight later. The upshot of the discussion is that moral responsibility does not necessarily entail the categorical power to do otherwise, thereby guaranteeing the compatibility of determinism and responsibility.

ESBG is somewhat uneven as the first part takes the lion's share of the book. The second part applies the lessons of the first part to the problem of divine involvement in evil and sin. Bignon argues that, given compatibilism, God cannot be held to be morally

responsible for sins or other evil actions of humans, even though God has decreed them beforehand. This is because God's actions in bringing about human evil actions do not constitute any kind of coercion or manipulation, as Bignon attempts to show in the first part. Evil actions can be justifiably attributed to the human individuals, because it is enough for moral responsibility that the individual's action is produced by her God-given character. This is why the "buck of responsibility" stops with the individual, not God.

Bignon's argumentative strategy is, for the most part, defensive. He does not seek to establish the truth of theological determinism, only its compatibility with human moral responsibility and God's goodness. In this sense, Bignon, even if successful, can hardly be said to have defended Calvinism, if we take Calvinism to be the affirmation of both the truth of theological determinism and human moral responsibility. Moreover, Bignon maintains that the burden of proof lays on the incompatibilist, not on the compatibilist: the incompatibilist should produce an argument that demonstrates why the two claims, "God ultimately determines everything that happens" and "humans are morally responsible for their actions", are incompatible. Until a sound argument is presented, the compatibilist should not give in. The consequence argument and the manipulation argument do not succeed, Bignon maintains. He also readily admits that he does not offer necessary and sufficient conditions for moral responsibility. Again, this reflects his defensive stance: he only argues for the conclusion that moral responsibility does not require indeterminism. Thus, the categorical ability to do otherwise at the moment of choice is not needed for responsibility.

Given the limitations of the review format, I cannot discuss or assess all the arguments of ESBG (even while the book would certainly merit such a treatment). Instead, I will highlight some arguments that I find to be original contributions to the free will debate in philosophical theology.

One of the most interesting arguments I found in ESBG was in a section that discusses the theological consequences of PAP. Famously, Martin Luther claimed in his *De Servo Arbitrio* that if humans had the ability to do otherwise, especially the ability to choose between right or wrong actions, they would, by implication, possess the ability to save themselves. Contrary to this, we know from Scriptures, that humans are unable to save themselves and consequently need God's help. As Bignon points out, Luther repeats this over and over in *De Servo Arbitrio* but never really offers an argument for it. It is not obvious that the claim "humans are able to save themselves" can be deduced from "humans have the ability to choose between right and wrong actions". To support Luther's (and Calvin's) view, Bignon does offer an argument to this effect (133-137). Such an argument, as far as I know, has not been systematically presented earlier. Without going into the mechanics of Bignon's argument (possible worlds, etc.), the basic idea is that if PAP is a necessary truth, then there should be a possible world where an individual makes righteous choices only and thereby manages to live in such a way that guarantees God's favor towards her without God's grace. This might not be the actual world, but the existence of such a world guarantees the possibility that the agent *could have* worked her way to heaven. In this sense, the agent in the actual world is a sinner but not necessarily so. There are three ways out: (1) reject PAP, which would leave compatibilism standing as a winner, (2) reject moral responsibility, which would result in accepting universalism, or finally (3) accept Pelagianism, which Bignon (following Luther and others) rejects as unorthodox.

Regarding PAP, Bignon presents a number of interesting criticisms and suggestions. First, he proposes new criticisms of all three versions of the consequence argument. Bignon

maintains that there is a crucial equivocation going on in the arguments: they implicitly assume a libertarian picture of free will. Second, ESG also contains a defence of the much-criticised *conditional analysis* of PAP. Bignon maintains that these criticisms mostly miss the mark and compatibilists should hold onto the ability to do otherwise analysed conditionally. PAP as a general thesis entails a *categorical analysis* of “ability”: “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if, *all things inside and outside the person being just as they are at the moment of choice*, he could have done otherwise” (72). Contrary to this, the conditional analysis of “ability” states that “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise, *had his inner desires inclined him to do so at the moment of choice*” (72). The latter, conditional analysis, is compatible with determinism and salvages a form of PAP. Bignon then goes on to argue that such a conditional version of PAP can satisfy the role we want PAP to have in our moral judgments without the incompatibilist assumption. Also, he states that Peter van Inwagen and others have not offered good defences as to why the categorical analysis of “ability” should be accepted instead of the conditional analysis. He then runs all three versions of the consequence argument with the conditional ability to control one’s actions and seeks to show that they don’t succeed in establishing incompatibilism. Thus, PAP plus the conditional analysis of “ability” is enough for moral responsibility.

ESG also provides an all-out attack on the categorical version of PAP based on theological premises. The first main argument is an argument from divine impeccability. Christians believe that God is morally perfect and praiseworthy but at the same time He lacks the categorical ability to do otherwise. God’s moral nature makes it impossible for Him to commit evil or morally wrong actions. God’s goodness is an essential and necessary part of His nature. If we can justifiably praise God for His moral perfection while God, nevertheless, lacks the categorical ability to do otherwise, then the categorical version of PAP is not necessary for moral responsibility.

Bignon follows this argument up with a second argument that seeks to deduce the truth of compatibilism (and the falsity of incompatibilism) from the claim that the categorical version of PAP is false. Here, Bignon provides an interesting but somewhat problematic discussion of source incompatibilism (or virtue libertarianism) defended by, for instance, Kevin Timpe.¹ Normally, source incompatibilism concedes that the kind of “leeway” provided by the categorical version of PAP is not needed for responsibility. What is needed is that the sources of the agent’s actions are “up to the agent herself”, which in turn requires that these sources are undetermined by external causes. Bignon applies pressure towards this idea and argues that the advocates of the “sourcehood condition” end up, at some point, invoking the “leeway condition”, namely the categorical PAP, even if they do not seem to be doing so at first. This, if correct, will put the sourcehood libertarians in the hot water with other libertarians, if the categorical version of PAP is shown to be false.

Finally, I want to highlight Bignon’s strategy for overcoming different versions of the manipulation argument. I hope I am not alone in thinking that the strongest challenge for compatibilism comes from the manipulation argument, not from the consequence argument. Minimally, the intuition that determinism entails some sort of problematic manipulation or lack of control over the agent’s actions is rather strong. The basic structure of various manipulation arguments is as follows. First one establishes that if an agent is manipulated

¹ Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

into acting in a certain way, the agent is not morally responsible for that fact. Second, one claims that there is no relevant difference between manipulation and the truth of determinism: whatever it is about manipulation that excludes responsibility, that same feature is present if determinism is true. Hence, determinism excludes everyone from responsibility.

Responses to manipulation arguments can take two forms: soft-line or hard-line response. The hard-line response is to reject the first claim, that manipulation excuses the agent from responsibility. The soft-line response, which Bignon develops as well, accepts the first claim but rejects the second. So, the task of the soft-line responder is to show why manipulation and determinism are disanalogous in the sense that the former excludes moral responsibility but the latter does not.

Bignon takes on a number of manipulation arguments: Derk Pereboom's four case argument, Alfred Mele's Zygote argument, Katherin Rogers' Divine controller argument, and Robert Kane's Walden Two argument. His strategy is to differentiate between two kinds of manipulation: *overriding manipulation*, that bypasses the agent's decision-making mechanisms completely, and *influencing manipulation*, which consists of influencing the agent by morally problematic means, like blackmail, through her cognitive apparatus without bypassing it. He then argues that God's bringing about human choices and actions does not necessarily entail overriding or influencing manipulation. God does not bypass humans' cognitive apparatus, nor does He coerce, blackmail or otherwise influence them externally. Instead, God sets up the world such that people develop the characters they in fact do and act on the basis of them. So, there is a relevant difference between human actions committed under manipulation and in the case of determinism being true: the agent's actions under manipulation have their sources somewhere else than in the agent's God-given character, but if determinism is true, this does not hold. Bignon then uses this criterion to dismantle the various manipulation arguments on the table.

Regarding Pereboom's four-case argument, Bignon draws the line between cases 1-2 and 3.² In the first two cases, professor Plum (the subject of the cases) is clearly under overriding manipulation. However, case 3 is missing the relevant details about the nature of influencing manipulation. If there is no improper influencing manipulation and overriding manipulation is missing, it seems that professor Plum would be responsible in case 3. This means there is a disanalogy between determinism and manipulation after all: manipulation always involves some outside "meddling" into the agent's God-given, (apparently) naturally developing character. Bignon then uses this strategy to counter the rest of the arguments. Mele's, Kane's and Rogers' arguments are all taken apart in the same fashion. They all introduce a manipulator that "meddles" with the development of the agent. The theist God, according to Bignon, does not (or at least has not been shown) to "meddle" in this way.

I am not completely convinced that these moves will get the compatibilist off the hook with respect to manipulation. This is because of the vagueness of "God-given character". It seems that in order to dismantle the manipulation argument, the compatibilist should have a clear positive criterion for moral responsibility. So, at this point, I will pick up the discussion regarding the lack of universal jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for moral responsibility. As already pointed out above, Bignon admits not producing such

² For the details of the argument, various responses to it, and Pereboom's defences, see Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency and Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71-103.

conditions. As the previous discussion highlights, he does, nevertheless, present an interesting candidate: the agent is morally responsible for those actions that are determined by the agent's desires and intentions that flow from her God-given character (36-37). This sufficient condition fits in very well with Bignon's overall compatibilist framework. Being responsible does not require PAP, nor does it require some sort of Ultimate Responsibility of the Robert Kane variety (which is extensively discussed in the philosophical literature but not in ESG). According to the latter view, the ultimate structure of the agent's character and motivations needs to be in her own control. Contrary to this, Bignon's view is that the agent need not have such abilities for responsibility. It is enough that the agent acts on the basis of her character in ways that are not products of coercion, manipulation, or other such external force.

Bignon's condition is closely related to so called "true self" or "quality of will" theories of moral responsibility. According to these theories (inspired by Peter Strawson, but ESG only mentions Susan Wolf), praise, blame and other moral attitudes are responses to the perceived quality of will of the agent: the agent is responsible for those actions that reflect her valuations, intentions and character. However, this link between Bignon's approach and the true self theories is not developed in ESG. This would be a fruitful avenue to pursue in the future.

Returning to "God-given character", I see some problems in defining it. How do we know the ways in which God acts in producing people's characters? Or to put it in another way: how can we distinguish between the ways God would use and those God wouldn't? This is important, because Bignon uses this condition to delineate between manipulation and determinism, as we already saw in connection with the manipulation arguments. It seems that God's ways of shaping our character align with how humans "naturally" develop without morally problematic manipulation or coercion. But what is "natural" development? Moreover, is it not the fact that God is ultimately responsible for the agent's character the source of the problem in the first place? Perhaps some idea of a "design plan" for humanity might be of use here. Otherwise (apart from God's goodness), there seems to be nothing preventing God from shaping our character in ways that resemble manipulation or some such. Be that as it may, developing a more comprehensive Calvinist (or Lutheran or broadly speaking Augustinian) theory of moral responsibility would be a worthwhile project. Working out the ways in which God shapes our character without resorting to morally problematic means, like manipulation, would be part of this project. As far as I know, only the theologian Jesse Couenhoven has attempted to develop such a view in the context of contemporary philosophical theology.³

Overall, I found ESG to be an excellent contribution to the current debate on free will in philosophical theology. I cannot claim mastery of all the books in the domain, but as far as I can see, ESG is one of the best defences of theological compatibilism available. Many of the issues in the book would merit a longer discussion: the book is rather philosophy heavy and rooted in the analytic free will discourse. It is also very dense: those who are not professional philosophers will easily fall of the wagon. Building bridges towards historical and contemporary systematic theology (especially of the Calvinist variety) would have been useful and made ESG more easily accessible to theologians. Its inventive criticisms of PAP

³ Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and other arguments make the book interesting for non-theological enthusiasts of the free will debate as well.