

**Kevin Timpe, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*  
(New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014, x + 177  
pp. \$120).**

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Like many book titles, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* falls short of providing a full account of the contents of Kevin Timpe's most recent book. He provides a more informative (though less euphonious) description when he says that his goal is "to engage in clarification regarding the role that a particular kind of source incompatibilist view [of free will], namely virtue libertarianism, can play in a range of theological issues involving free will" (103). It should be added that the source for the formulation of those issues is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. But the issues addressed are not Catholic in any narrow denominational sense; the same issues arise in many versions of orthodox Christian theology. The main topics considered are the following:

- How is the choice to sin explicable, given the connection between free will and the good?
- How is it that a non-fallen, uncorrupted moral agent could choose to sin?
- Do those in hell—that is, the damned—have free will? And if so, does that mean that they are able to choose to get out of hell?
- Similarly, if freedom involves the ability to do evil, how are we to understand the redeemed, who presumably are not able to sin but purportedly are still free?
- Is God free? If so, is divine freedom at all like human freedom? (12)

For the most part, I will not discuss Timpe's answers to these questions in detail. Suffice it to say that he provides thoughtful, well-researched and well-argued answers to each of the questions. That is not to say, of course, that he lays the topics to rest; they will continue to be controversial, just as the very existence of free will remains controversial. But anyone concerned with one or more of these questions will find Timpe's thoughts about them well worth considering.

My main focus in this review will be on Timpe's conception of free will; obviously, his conclusions on particular topics will depend on that conception, and to the extent that it is flawed the entire project is threatened. The view taken of free will involves four main ideas:

1. *Incompatibilism* holds that human free will is incompatible with the view that all of our actions are determined by prior causes, whether by natural

causes or by divine predetermination.

2. *Libertarianism*: Most incompatibilists are libertarians, maintaining that we do in fact make free decisions that are not determined. (A few philosophers are incompatibilists who also affirm some variety of determinism; their view is that, because of this determinism, free will does not exist. An example is Derk Pereboom's *Living Without Free Will*.<sup>1</sup>)
3. *Virtue libertarianism* is a view concerning what is required for a particular decision to qualify as free. According to virtue libertarianism, an action can be free even if, in the particular circumstances, the agent was unable to do anything else. This can be so, if the agent's character makes it impossible for her to choose not to do the action in question. Such an action can still be free (and the agent responsible for it), *if the agent's character is itself in part the result of undetermined choices she made at an earlier time*. This contrasts with the view that a choice is free only if *that particular choice* is one she could have made differently, her character and all other circumstances being exactly as they in fact were.
4. *Source incompatibilism* (or source libertarianism) is the view that what is most important for free will is not (as many hold) our having alternative possibilities, but rather that we ourselves are the ultimate source of our own actions.

Interestingly, Timpe never provides a general argument in favor of his conception of free will; he states that he is content to "show that the approach that I'm adopting here . . . is not without pedigree in the history of Christian theology" (10). He does, however, argue at various points for specific elements of his view. He argues against theological determinism in the chapter on "realigning a fallen will," which discusses the issues of conversion in relation (among other things) to election and predestination. His account of virtue libertarianism brings out the way in which that view allows us to count as "free" choices that we would like to so regard, but which might not be free if we were to insist on genuinely available alternatives for the particular action. (This is particularly pertinent with respect to the freedom of the redeemed in heaven: they freely choose to love God even though, given the perfected state of their character, turning away from God is impossible for them.)

Timpe never argues, in this volume, for the fourth element in the explication of free will, in which he endorses source incompatibilism in preference to alternative possibilities incompatibilism, according to which for an action to be free there must be alternative actions that are genuinely possible for the agent to perform. I am inclined to think this is a mistake. True, Timpe has argued for this conception in other writings, particularly in his book, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*.<sup>2</sup> But given the plethora of material that is being produced, it is not safe to assume that one's readers will have read one's earlier writings. And the matter is

<sup>1</sup> Derk Pereboom. 2011. *Living Without Free Will*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Timpe. 2012. *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*. Second edition. London: Bloomsbury.

of some importance, surely enough to warrant a few additional pages in what is after all a fairly short book.

To be sure, one might be tempted to think the question is of little practical import. Where human beings are concerned, if one's choices are fully determined by one's genetic inheritance in conjunction with the circumstances in which one finds oneself, one will not be the "ultimate source" of one's own actions, and those actions will not be free either for the alternative possibilities incompatibilist or for the source incompatibilist. Either way, there will need to be, at some earlier point in the causal chain, morally relevant choices made by the person that are not determined by any previous causes. Nor does the option for virtue libertarianism automatically favor source incompatibilism. The "tracing principle," according to which choices made later in the causal sequence can "inherit" freedom from those made earlier, is accepted by many alternative possibility incompatibilists. Where human freedom is concerned, the decision between the two varieties of incompatibilism seems to be of mainly theoretical interest.

The situation is different, however, when we consider divine freedom. The divine nature and character, unlike those of human beings, are not the result of anything external to God; in that sense, God is the ultimate source of everything that flows from his own character. And this seems to offer an advantage for our understanding of divine freedom. Human beings notoriously enjoy the freedom to choose between good and evil, in circumstances where either choice is really possible for them. God, on the other hand, "cannot be tempted by evil," so God never faces this kind of alternative possibilities; it seems, then, that God is lacking in this crucial dimension of freedom. But on the source incompatibilist view, God *is* completely free in choosing the good, even if a choice of evil is impossible for him, just because God is, in any such instance, the ultimate source of his own actions.

Upon reflection, the benefits of this move are not so clear. First of all, there will remain important differences between divine freedom and human freedom, even if source incompatibilism enables us to bring the two under the same formal definition. Timpe devotes considerable attention to these differences, but given the differences the agreement in formal definition may be of limited value. But there is worse to come. Given source incompatibilism, God's having free will does not require that God has alternative possibilities *at all*, in *any* of his decisions to act. This means that everything God does, for instance in creating, could be strictly determined by God's nature, yet God would still enjoy full libertarian freedom. Timpe embraces this result: "[I]f there is a single best possible world, then there exist normative reasons for God to create that world rather than any of the less good worlds. Given that God's motivational reasons necessarily track the normative reasons, God would therefore create that world, that is, the best world" (116). Timpe is not committed to the view that there *is* a single best world, but C. S. Lewis, quoted by Timpe in an epigraph to the chapter on divine freedom, apparently embraces this view as the sober truth: "Whatever human freedom means, Divine freedom cannot mean indeterminacy between alternatives and the choice of one of them. Perfect goodness can never debate about the end to be obtained, and perfect

wisdom cannot debate about the means most suited to achieve it" (103).<sup>3</sup> At this point, I submit, something has gone badly wrong. According to mainstream Christian theism, there was no necessity for God to create at all, nor for him to create in one particular way rather than any other. Furthermore, redemption from sin, and the sacrifice of the Savior, are said to be a matter of divine grace, not of necessity—not even of moral necessity. Now, however, we are told that God can be perfectly free, in the fullest sense of that term, even though it was absolutely impossible, given God's nature, that he decide any single matter differently than he has in fact decided it. It is hard not to think that the "freedom" thus posited is of the Pickwickian sort, not robust enough to satisfy the theological demands that motivate the affirmation that God is free. Furthermore, those who assert that divine freedom has no need for alternatives are surely in a weakened dialectical position to argue against compatibilists who insist that human freedom, also, has no need of such alternatives (compare Leibniz).

But let's pursue the matter of God's choice in creating a bit further. Timpe, as has been noted, is not committed to the idea that there exists a single best possible world. Against William Rowe, he argues (correctly, I think) that if there is an endless series of better and better possible worlds, God is in no way morally deficient if he selects a good world to create, even though better possible worlds exist that he might have created instead. (Given the no-best-world assumption, God's doing this is logically unavoidable.) Timpe, however, apparently concurs with Rowe in dismissing as unattractive the possibility that there are a number of unsurpassably good possible worlds, none of which is better than any other. Rowe says that on this view "God is free only *when it does not matter what he does*" (115).<sup>4</sup> I believe there is a way of avoiding Rowe's conclusion here, a way that leads us to a richer appreciation of God's freedom in creation. Thomas Morris makes an important point when he writes, "[I]t is extremely difficult to suppose that there is a single scale of value on which all possible creations could be ranked. ... There are all sorts of values, or valuable properties, that different sorts of creatures might exemplify. And there is no reason to think that all these creaturely values are commensurable, comparable on a single scale of measurement" (Morris 1993, 236).<sup>5</sup> In view of this, "Some world *A* might be better than rival world *B* in some respect, with *B* surpassing *A* in others, and the relevant values not such that they could be summed over and compared overall" (Ibid., 236f). With respect to creaturely values, Morris' point here seems extremely plausible. Think, for example, of the many competing values involved in all kinds of artistic creation, values that render the search for the "best and greatest" work, even within a particular category, forever undecidable. Why could it not be true that the divine Artist, selecting between creation alternatives, was confronted with similar choices? (To assert that "Of course, God would know which of the alternatives *really was* the best," is question-begging: it assumes the very point at issue, namely that there *is* an objective fact of the matter as to which is

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1940), p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from William Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Morris, "Perfection and Creation," in *Reasoned Faith*, edited by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

best.) Here is another consideration: Suppose that (as Timpe agrees) the world contains agents whose actions are indeterministic, including (but not necessarily limited to) free human agents. Suppose also (again, as Timpe agrees) that Molinism is false, and there is no divine middle knowledge. Then God's creation alternatives will not be whole possible worlds—that is, complete world-scenarios, including each and every event that will ever take place. Rather, God will choose to bring into existence an “initial creation-situation,” and the future evolution of that situation will be determined jointly by the actions of those indeterministic created agents and the subsequent decisions of God himself. Putting all these considerations together, we arrive at a view of God's creative options far more complex than the simple trilemma of God's choosing the “best possible world” (which then in effect becomes the *only* possible world), or choosing one from a linear series of better and better worlds, or choosing between equal options where “it does not matter” which is chosen. (I believe this line of thought can be developed in such a way as to make it plausible that God might have decided to create no world at all, but I will not pursue that here.<sup>5</sup>)

Disagreements of this sort in no way detract from the excellence of Timpe's accomplishment in his book; rather, they underscore that excellence by showing how the book provides fodder for further reflection. The work deserves careful consideration by all theologians and philosophers who are engaged with the important problems it addresses.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this see my *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), ch. 11, and *The Triumph of God Over Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), ch. 4.