Free Will

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It has been pointed out that "concerns about freedom, the will, and agency are nearly ubiquitous in contemporary philosophy of religion" (Speak and Timpe 2016, 9). This ubiquity isn't entirely novel. Central figures in the history of Western philosophy have been reflecting on the nature and implications of free will at least since Augustine (see AUGUSTINE, SAINT), and arguably earlier.

Wherever exactly we first find philosophical reflection on free will, anyone familiar with the history of philosophy of religion, particularly within the Christian tradition (see CHRISTIANITY), will know that it has played a crucial role in religious thought. Most of the major historical figures in philosophy with an interest in matters religious have addressed free will as part of their philosophical systems. (Many of these figures and their views on free will can be found in Timpe, Griffith, and Levy 2017.) Contemporary philosophy of religion is decidedly Christian-centric, and the present entry inherits that larger philosophical bias. However, much of what is described here could be endorsed by those belonging to other theological traditions.

The present entry cannot thoroughly map out the vast topography that philosophical reflection on free will has in contemporary philosophy of religion. Rather modestly, it will set forth some of the major issues, equipping the reader for further exploration in the scholarship highlighted along the way. This entry focuses primarily on the following three areas where contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion intersect with discussions about the nature of free will: (i) challenges to the rationality of religious belief, (ii) the doctrines of creation and conservation, and (iii) issues eschatological.

Before beginning, however, a few definitions. Compatibilism is the view that the existence of free will is compatible with the truth of determinism, and for present purposes we can take that to include both causal determinism and theological determinism. Incompatibilism, as the name suggests, is the view that the existence of free will is incompatible with the truth of determinism. Neither of these positions makes a claim about either the existence of free will or the truth of determinism; they are simply claims about the modal relation between the two. Libertarianism is a species of incompatibilism that affirms the existence of human freedom and, as a result, denies that determinism is true.

Challenges to the rationality of religious belief

Surveying the past 40 years, it would be hard to overestimate the centrality of free will for responding to a family of the most influential objections to religious belief.

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Here, for simplicity, a few leading figures will represent the larger narrative. For much of the middle of the twentieth century, theistic philosophy of religion was marginalized within the wider philosophical profession (see Speak and Timpe 2016). In this context, J.L. Mackie (see MACKIE, JOHN LESLIE) published his now-infamous paper "Evil and Omnipotence" (Mackie 1955), hoping to show a logical inconsistency in the various claims of traditional theism, thus dismissing it as a serious philosophical interlocutor. Mackie sought to show a logical incompatibility between the existence of evil and the existence of God. Mackie's argument had great initial influence. It was in this context that Alvin Plantinga's response (1977) to Mackie's article would have its own impact on subsequent decades – an impact that has not yet dissipated. Not only did many, perhaps even most, philosophers of religion reject that Mackie-style arguments succeed in showing the intended incompatibility, but in the wake of Plantinga's work – and the similar work of others – philosophy of religion experienced a renaissance.

At the heart of Mackie's criticism is this purported inconsistency:

> In its simplest form the problem of evil is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them are true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three. (Mackie 1955, 200)

After showing what else would be necessary for these three propositions to be formally contradictory, Plantinga argued that there was in fact no contradiction at all and that the theist's position is consistent if it is possible that God has a reason for allowing the existence of evil, such as the following:

> The heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil. (Plantinga 1977, 31)

And why might this be? Here Plantinga appeals to free will, specifically as understood by the libertarian. (Plantinga at times talks about free will as if it were the good in question, while at other times he talks about free will as necessary for other goods, such as morally good actions, virtue, etc)

Many take Plantinga's defense to have decisively silenced the logical problem of evil, though a number of scholars dissent. Atheist William Rowe (see ROWE, WILLIAM L.) characterized the dialectic in this way:

> Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, granted incompatibilism, there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God. (Rowe 1996, 10n1)

Rowe's comments both illustrate the perceived success of Plantinga's project and highlight the centrality of a specifically libertarian conception in that success. Plantinga's defense seems to elucidate just how crucial an explicit account of the nature of free will turns out to be for the rationality of theistic belief.

Roughly simultaneously, John Hick (see HICK, JOHN) published his enormously influential monograph *Evil and the God of Love*, which makes explicit appeal to the claim that human beings have libertarian freedom. Hick's Irenaean soul-making theodicy builds on the distinctive value of our free efforts to develop good character traits in the face of adversity. Though Hick does little to defend a libertarian conception of free will, he believes it is "the one that seems intuitively most adequate to our ordinary experience as moral agents" (Hick 1978, 278).

In the subsequent decades, appeals to free will have continued to be a standard part of the strategy of addressing the entire family of objections that are versions of "the problem of evil." Nearly every recent systematic effort to address this problem draws on the importance of a robust understanding of free will. Though most of these replies to the problem of evil involve free will as understood by libertarianism, there are also compatibilist free will defenses.

Relatedly, another significant challenge to theistic belief is the problem of DIVINE HIDDENNESS. (Whether or not the problem of divine hiddenness is a version of the problem of evil is contested.) J.L. Schellenberg holds the existence of reasonable unbelief as providing strong evidence against the existence of God (Schellenberg 1993). A loving God would want to be in a life-giving reciprocal relationship with all persons. However, this can only be if they are able to believe that God exists. Schellenberg concludes that a loving God would always make it possible for creatures to rationally believe that God exists. Thus, reasonable unbelief gives reason to believe that a perfectly loving God doesn't exist.

As with the various versions of the problem of evil, important and influential replies to divine hiddenness appeal to the importance of the preservation of human freedom. Michael Murray, for instance, writes that "it seems that to preserve the exercise of robust, significant free will, God cannot provide grand-scale, fireworks displays in an effort to make His existence known. Further, free creatures may hinder attempts by God to reveal Himself on a more individual basis by human defectiveness understood in terms of willful rejection of revelatory evidence" (Murray 1993, 37). So, out of love for individuals and their free will, God sometimes remains at an epistemic distance to avoid a coercive relationship.

Creation and conservation

Reflection on the nature of free will is also pivotal in the doctrines of creation and conservation (see CREATION AND CONSERVATION).

How is divine creation related to free will? According to the standard doctrine of creation in the Judeo-Christian (see JUDAISM) and Islamic traditions (see ISLAM), God creates *freely*. But what exactly does *that* mean? And even if we understand what

it means to say that God's creative activity is a function of divine freedom, the question of the relationship between the creator's freedom and creaturely freedom arises. Does the concept of freedom apply to God in the same way as it applies to human beings? Should one's account of divine agency be isomorphic to one's account of human agency? (See Timpe 2014, chapter 7, and the literature engaged there.)

God's power with respect to the world is not exhausted by God's creative act. Though contemporary treatments don't often make a tight connection between the doctrine of divine creation and the doctrine of divine conservation, historically the two have been intertwined. According to the doctrine of divine conservation, creation is equally dependent on God for its being sustained in existence as it is for its coming into existence. So God actively and freely sustains in existence not only, for example, the smallpox virus (responsible for the deaths of over 400,000,000 individuals in a century), but also the intentions and material means by which wicked people inflict horrible suffering on others. And insofar as God is at least partially causally responsible for such events via divine conservation, the theist needs to give an account of why God isn't also thereby at least *partially* morally responsible for the same events.

Eschatology

Finally, consider the role that free will plays with respect to various aspects of ESCHATOLOGY. Christian reflection on human sinfulness has typically been connected with a retributive conception of punishment which holds that the appropriateness of punishment is grounded in basic desert.

The issue of the appropriateness of punishment, and its connection with human freedom, becomes all the more important when HEAVEN and HELL and other eschatological locations are foregrounded. Traditional Christian doctrine holds that those who are justified via Christ's atoning work will be united with God in the beatific vision in heaven, while those whose sin prevents such a union will instead face separation, punishment, or despair in hell. The traditional understandings of heaven and hell require that divine judgment be just, and thus only those who are *deserving* of damnation are in fact damned. Though much of the literature doesn't explicitly draw the connection, we can understand Galen Strawson's concept of "heaven and hell responsibility" (which he employs in an argument for the impossibility of moral responsibility) to be at work here: "true moral responsibility is responsibility of such a kind that, if we have it, then it makes sense, at least, to suppose that it could be just to punish some of us with (eternal) torment in hell and reward others with (eternal) bliss in heaven" (Strawson 1994, 9). Many accounts of the nature and deservingness of hell depend upon a robust notion of responsibility and human freedom. Similarly, recent philosophical discussions of heaven also afford free will a crucial place.

In addition to heaven and hell, the potential role of eschatological freedom has also led philosophers to reflect on purgatory and limbo. Contemporary philosophical reflection on purgatory was largely spurred by a chapter in Jerry Walls's book on heaven, which has since expanded in both development and influence (Walls 2011).

For Walls, the doctrine of purgatory is "a rational theological inference from other important biblical and theological commitments … for those who take seriously the role of human freedom in salvation" (2011, 56). Walls differentiates two primary models of purgatory, based respectively on satisfaction and sanctification. The former understands purgatory as a place where "punishments can be applied to persons to satisfy moral and spiritual debts that they failed to pay in this life" (2011, 62). In contrast, Walls endorses a sanctification model according to which humans freely cooperate with God to continue and complete sanctification such that they are no longer capable of freely choosing to sin. (On these two models, see also Timpe 2014.) Finally, there is at least one account of limbo in which free will is central (Timpe 2015). Timpe's account differs from the element of Catholic speculative theology that goes by the same name, which is often understood to be a place or state of perfect natural happiness for those who, prior to the age of reason, die without baptism. Instead, Timpe suggests that limbo is a place where individuals who have not had an opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life will be given such an opportunity to do so in the next life – an opportunity which involves their being able to choose for or against eschatological union with God.

Conclusion

The above discussion is not intended to be exhaustive. But the importance of free will for issues in philosophy of religion should be obvious. While this entry has focused on the rationality of religious belief, the doctrines of creation and conservation, and eschatology, there are numerous other areas in philosophy of religion where free will plays a crucial role: accounts of the nature of particular DIVINE ATTRIBUTES, models of divine PROVIDENCE, and particular Christian doctrines such as the INCARNATION. Even this expanded list isn't exhaustive. As a result, there is considerable reason to think that free will's importance for philosophy of religion will not wane soon.

***See also*:** ATHEISM; DIVINE ATTRIBUTES; ESCHATOLOGY; EVIL AS A PROBLEM FOR THEISM; EVIL AND SUFFERING; OMNIBENEVOLENCE; OMNIPOTENCE; PROVIDENCE; SOVEREIGNTY

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