

**PATRICK RICHMOND**

## Neuroscientific Determinism and the Problem of Evil

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*This article examines Christian responses to the threat of physical determinism from neuroscience. Some have argued that elements of physical indeterminism, such as quantum theory, provide a basis for libertarian freedom and responsibility and a way of exculpating God. Others have argued that such theories are problematic and at best speculative and have proposed a view of freedom compatible with determinism. However, they have offered little defence against the problems of sin and evil that arise without libertarianism. I proceed to argue that libertarianism does not enhance responsibility or distance God from sin as far as one might think. I then outline possible strategies for justifying the punishment of predetermined wrongdoing and God's acceptance of sin that remain open to the compatibilist.*

**Keywords:** determinism, problem of evil, providence, free will, compatibilism, libertarianism

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The interrelation of God's providence with human freedom has occasioned perplexity and controversy throughout the history of Christianity. Theologians have been torn between a desire to affirm God's sovereignty and control, and a desire to maintain human responsibility and distance God from sin. Intertwined with this discussion is the perennial question of whether some form of determinism is true, and whether some form of moral responsibility is compatible with it.<sup>1</sup> In the philosophical literature, those who believe that determinism is compatible with responsibility are often termed *compatibilists*, those who believe it is not, *incompatibilists*.<sup>2</sup> Incompatibilists who believe that we have indeterministic freewill are usually termed metaphysical *libertarians*. Libertarianism has appealed to many Christians, not least because it suggests a reason why there is evil in the world; God logically cannot give us responsibility without giving us indeterministic free-will that he cannot fully control. This is the basis of the so-called *free-will defence* to the problem of evil. However, if compatibilism is true then it undermines the free-will defence and the question arises as to why God does not determine our choices to be good all the time.

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1 See Kane, R. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press (2002), for a recent overview of the whole field of debate.

2 Note that these same terms, compatibilism and incompatibilism, may be used to label positions in other debates e.g. about the compatibility of Christianity with a physicalist view of the person. To avoid confusion I will be using these terms only in the sense defined above.

In the past this debate was dominated by biblical, philosophical and theological arguments, but modern, neuroscientific discoveries concerning the involvement of the physical brain in the processes of thought and choice have raised the issue of physical determinism in a pressing way.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, it has long been realised that certain theories about causation in the natural world are in apparent tension with libertarian freedom, and no radically novel issues of principle are raised by neuroscience. However, as science progressively reduces the gaps in our knowledge of how the brain works it forces theologians to deal with matters of empirical fact and threatens to undermine speculative appeals to ignorance.

Several articles in this journal have touched on these questions and I briefly review them below. Some have argued that elements of physical indeterminism, such as quantum theory, provide a basis for libertarian freedom and responsibility and a way of exculpating God. Others have argued that such theories are problematic and at best speculative, and have proposed a compatibilist response, but have offered little defence against the problems of sin and evil that exist without libertarianism. I proceed to argue that libertarianism does not enhance responsibility or distance God from sin as far as one might think, before outlining possible strategies for justifying the punishment of pre-determined wrongdoing and God's acceptance of sin that remain open to the compatibilist.

### **Speculative libertarianism and compatibilism undefended against evil**

Jonathan Doye et al<sup>4</sup> compared and contrasted the views of leading writers on science and theology, John Polkinghorne, Arthur Peacocke and Donald MacKay. Polkinghorne and Peacocke are libertarians, incompatibilists who believe in indeterministic freedom, while MacKay was a compatibilist who believed that God predetermines all things. Doye et al noted how Peacocke and Polkinghorne significantly revised traditional views of providence and denied divine foreknowledge in order to accommodate libertarian freedom.<sup>5</sup> They argued that Peacocke and Polkinghorne failed to show how indeterminism enhances our responsibility and control of our choices. However, while they favoured MacKay's approach, they did not endorse MacKay's compatibilist view of freedom nor explain why there is sin in the world if God can determine our choices.

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3 Some of these discoveries are outlined in the article by Malcolm Jeeves, 'How Free is Free?', in this issue, p. 101.

4 Doye, J., Goldby, I., Line, C., Lloyd, S., Shellard, P. & Tricker, D. 'Contemporary Perspectives on Chance, Providence and Free Will' *Science and Christian Belief* (1995) 7(2), 117 – 140.

5 Polkinghorne and Peacocke argue that infallible foreknowledge cannot be reconciled with libertarian freedom. See Zagzebski, L.T. 'Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will', Chapter 2 in Kane, R. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press (2002) for a survey of the various strategies proposed to reconcile them and their attendant problems.

In his 2001 essay review<sup>6</sup>, David A Booth commented on *Reason, Science and Faith* by Paul Marston and Roger Forster<sup>7</sup>, taking issue with their suggestion that quantum physics is relevant to the question of free-will.

Booth rejected any reductive physicalism that takes physics, atoms or molecules as basic to reality while neglecting the significance of highly organised, complex systems. However, he also rejected claims that quantum uncertainty affects the brain or could underpin human free will. Freedom of the will cannot be a random bias in processes of decision-making. Rather, free-will means deciding or acting for one's own reasons (good or bad) while free from the sway of nonrational factors and external force and constraint.

Booth did address the problem of suffering, suggesting that

epidemics and famines are not merely challenges for economic and social change to counter the stupidity of underplanned development and to contain the evils of exploitation of the poor. They can also be seen as divinely sent messengers to guide us positively with empirical data to aid some better informed ethical balancing between the mandates in early Genesis to fill the earth and care for it.

However, he does not explain why God creates a world containing such moral stupidity or why it is that he does not give us data in a far less painful way.

Paul Marston, in his response to Booth<sup>8</sup>, agreed with him that higher order properties emerge from complex systems in a way that is unpredictable from basic physical laws alone. However, the critical issue is the question of macro-determinism. It is generally agreed that at the microscopic, quantum level physical reality is unpredictable. However, at the larger, macroscopic scale it may be the case that quantum uncertainty is cancelled out, yielding statistical certainty and macro-determinism. Alternatively, it may be that in some contexts quantum uncertainty is amplified so that the whole macroscopic system becomes unpredictable and indeterministic. Marston does not believe that this question is effectively settled, thus leaving scope for macro-indeterminism in the brain. He does not want to equate human purpose with 'chance' events in the sense of 'unintended'. At best, Marston's response leaves the question of macro-indeterminism unsettled. More fundamentally, as I argue below, it is doubtful whether libertarians can avoid a role for chance in the indeterministic formation of intentions, even if they want to.

Marston queries whether Booth's apparent macro-determinism leaves room for responsibility. He notes that Booth appears to assume compatibilism, but claims that compatibilism essentially redefines free will as 'absence of *external*

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6 Marston, Paul & Forster, Roger 'Neither Lifeless nor Mindless: A Commentary on "Reason, Science and Faith"', *Science and Christian Belief* (2001) 13(2), 143-154

7 Marston, P. & Forster, R. *Reason, Science and Faith*, Monarch books (1999).

8 Marston, P. 'Response to Booth', *Science and Christian Belief* (2001), 13(2), 155-161

compulsion'. In fact, at least since 1971 compatibilists have paid considerable attention to *internal* compulsion, that is, overriding, irrational urges, such as might arise from drug addictions, phobias or compulsive neuroses<sup>9</sup>. Compatibilists have pointed to several features of such internal compulsion that plausibly remove or seriously diminish freedom and responsibility, regardless of determinism. Subjects usually experience such compulsive urges as alien intrusions rather than identifying with them, they cannot resist or control them even if they want to, and they render the agent unresponsive to more normal values and reasons for action<sup>10</sup>. Such cases can thus be distinguished from those where there is conflict between duty and non-compulsive desires, where the subject can be held responsible for what he does. Marston objects that 'many philosophers believe compatibilism to be a total negation of any real or traditional meaning of the term "free will"' and cites Peter van Inwagen<sup>11</sup> in support of this. Admittedly, compatibilism is philosophically controversial<sup>12</sup> but Marston arguably overstates his case. Van Inwagen now has doubts whether *indeterminism* is compatible with responsibility,<sup>13</sup> and leading libertarians accept that the distinctions made by compatibilists *are* real and important, though they do not capture all that we want from 'free-will', such as ultimate responsibility and control.<sup>14</sup> Even if we discovered that all our actions were pre-determined, we would still prefer that they were done willingly, according to our own, intelligible reasons, rather than because of external force or compulsive urges.

In addition to the question of how we can be held responsible for determined sin there is the question of how God can escape responsibility for it. If every decision, such as Adam's to eat the forbidden fruit, is predictably determined by physiology and environment then why did God make the world like this, effectively pre-programmed to introduce sin? Marston argues that better initial 'engineering' by God could have preserved compatibilist free-will but ensured a sin-free creation.

Marston notes the Augustinian theological tradition espoused today, for example by Paul Helm,<sup>15</sup> that accepts that all events, including evil ones, are

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9 See e.g. Frankfurt, H. 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' *Journal of Philosophy* (1971) 68: 5-20 and Haji, I. 'Compatibilist Views of Freedom and Responsibility' chapter 9 of Kane, R. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press (2002).

10 See e.g. Fischer, J and Ravizza, M. *Responsibility and Control*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998), chapters 2 and 3 for a recent version of compatibilism that argues that responsible action should be 'moderately responsive to reasons' in a way that behaviour resulting from compulsive urges is not.

11 van Inwagen, P. *An Essay on Freewill*, Oxford: Clarendon (1983).

12 See Kane, R. (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, New York: Oxford University Press (2002) for recent surveys of compatibilism.

13 See van Inwagen, P. 'Freewill remains a mystery' Chapter 7 of Kane's *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*.

14 See e.g. Kane, R. *The significance of Freewill*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1996), pp.14-15.

15 Helm, P. *The Providence of God*, Leicester: Inter Varsity Press (1993).

determined by the will of God. He cites the biblical objections to such theologies argued in his work with Roger Forster, *God's Strategy in Human History*.<sup>16</sup> 'The biblical God often does not get what he wants in individual events in our world, as reflected in the sin (which he finds abhorrent) in each of our lives.' However, the Bible is a complex, controversial text, sometimes suggesting that sin *is* part of God's plan (e.g. Gen. 50.12, Prov. 16.4, Luke 22.20, Acts 4.23, 1 Pet. 2.8). If Marston is prepared to argue that God accepts sin for the sake of indeterministic freedom, compatibilists may argue that God accepts sin for the sake of other important goods, as discussed below. Nevertheless, Marston is right that compatibilism raises the problem of evil while undermining the popular free will defence.

John Byl takes issue with the idea that God created the world to be inherently indeterministic.<sup>17</sup> If creatures were independent, this would conflict with divine sovereignty and if the future were indeterminate, this would conflict with God's determinate foreknowledge. Byl rejects the Molinist theory of middle knowledge that seeks to combine a traditional view of providence with a libertarian view of freedom<sup>18</sup>. Molina argued that God can control the world by knowing what possible creatures would freely choose in hypothetical situations and choosing to create them in those situations accordingly. Byl asks how God could know with certainty the outcome of an uncertain event? This way of putting the problem may beg the question against the Molinist, who is denying that the hypothetical outcome *is* uncertain to God. However, there does seem to be a problem with the idea that there is any truth about what an undetermined creature would *definitely* do in a given situation. Surely the truth is that the creature *might* do one thing and might do another? God cannot know what an undetermined creature would definitely do because it is false that an undetermined creature would definitely do one thing rather than another.<sup>19</sup>

Byl does not discuss challenges to traditional doctrines of foreknowledge, such as those arising from texts where God is described as changing his mind (e.g. Exod. 32.14, Jonah 3.10) or speaking of the future in terms of maybes (e.g. Jer. 26.3, Ezek. 12.3). However, there are texts which suggest that God's knowledge of the *present* is limited (e.g. Gen. 3.9, 11.5, 18.20, Jer. 7.31) and that his beliefs about the future are actually *mistaken* (e.g. Jer. 3.6-7, 19-20). Such texts can be seen in the context of anthropomorphic texts talking of God's body parts (e.g. Gen. 6.6, Deut. 33.10, Is. 59.1) and his anthropomorphic actions, such as smelling (Gen. 8.21), wiping faces (Is. 25.8) and singing (Zeph. 3.17). Traditionally, such language has been taken figuratively so as not to conflict with

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16 Forster, R. & Marston, P. *God's Strategy in Human History*, Wipf & Stock (2000).

17 Byl, J. 'Indeterminacy, Divine Action and Human Freedom', *Science and Christian Belief* (2003) 15(2), 101-116

18 See Flint, T. P. *Providence: The Molinist Account*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press (1998) for an influential defence of Molinism.

19 See Cowan, S. B. 'The grounding objection to middle knowledge revisited', *Religious Studies* (2003) 39(1), 93-102 for development of this argument.

material teaching that God is not limited in such ways<sup>20</sup>. Not only is there evidence that God has foreknowledge of future choices, but many professional biblical scholars have argued that the Scriptures teach some form of divine pre-determination<sup>21</sup>.

Byl argues that positing indeterminism means denying that there is a sufficient reason for events and abandoning the quest for explanation. This is unnecessary, since deterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics are possible, and God may determine quantum events even if they have no physical cause. It has yet to be shown how quantum effects can actualise human choices or that the human mind can influence quantum events, casting doubt on the relevance of quantum physics to human freedom.

Human freedom, Byl argues, is more plausibly seen in compatibilist, rather than libertarian, terms. He argues that the Bible holds fallen man responsible for his words and deeds (Matt.12: 35-37), although he is born with a nature enslaved to sin (Rom. 8: 7-8).

Byl endorses David Hume's argument<sup>22</sup> that moral responsibility assumes determinism, for only on the assumption that there are reasons for our actions can we explain why reasoning, criticism and the prospect of reward or punishment influence them. Though such an argument would be cogent against anyone holding that choices are completely indifferent to reasons, it is too quick as a refutation of libertarianism. It is open to libertarians to claim that reasons, criticisms, rewards and punishments *incline* us to certain choices without guaranteeing them. They influence the probability of action, as Byl is aware. Allowing such influence is arguably all that the libertarian needs to rebut Hume's argument, though it hardly explains how indeterminism enhances responsibility.

As with the other papers critical of the indeterminist approach, Byl's offers little response to the problem of evil. Although he is aware of claims that determinism makes God responsible for evil, he does not argue directly against them. He merely argues that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility. This ignores the fact that both claims may be true; God may be respon-

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20 For further discussion of these issues see Richmond, P. 'Openness to the Bible? A Traditional Challenge to Clark Pinnock's Understanding of God' Chapter 5 of Gray, T. and Sinkinson, C. (eds.) *Reconstructing Theology: A Critical Assessment of the Theology of Clark Pinnock*. Carlisle: Paternoster (2000).

21 For argument that the Old Testament accepts God's omni-determination, see Winston, D. 'The Wisdom of Solomon' *The Anchor Bible*, 43, New York: Doubleday (1976) pp. 46-58. For Pauline predestination, see Sanders, E.P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress (1977); for Johannine predestination, see Carson, D. *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, Atlanta: John Knox (1981). For unconditional election, see 'Election' in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday (1992) pp. 434-444. Byl's main theological authority seems to be Raymond, Robert L. *A new systematic theology of the Christian faith*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson (1998).

22 Hume, D. *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, la Salle: Open Court (1958 reprint of 1777 edition) pp.104-107, cited in Byl, *op.cit.*

sible for evil for which we are also responsible. Once again, we are left wondering what the compatibilist is offering in place of the freewill defence to the problem of sin.

In his article in this issue,<sup>23</sup> Alan Torrance endorses incompatibilist views and further claims that indeterminism is necessary for rationality: 'approaches which suggest that the claims we make are the product of a tightly mechanistic chain of events undermine their claim to rationality – and, indeed, truth'. Although he is a libertarian, Richard Swinburne explains the confusion in this sort of argument against determinism:

to the extent that we regarded them as uncaused or self-chosen, we could not regard our beliefs as moulded by the facts and so likely to be true ... The point is rather that if we see some belief to be caused by a totally irrelevant factor ... then we rightly regard it as unjustified. But a belief that determinism is true could be both caused and justified, if caused by relevant factors, e.g. hearing relevant arguments.<sup>24</sup>

We do not need our beliefs to be indeterministically free, merely free from causes insensitive to logic and evidence. As computers and robots illustrate, mechanistic causes can be highly logical and sensitive to evidence.<sup>25</sup>

As do many other contributors, Torrance appeals to the emergent properties of highly organised, complex wholes. However, mere complexity does not generate indeterminism and can even cancel it out. Claims that the brain behaves indeterministically thus remain speculative. Further, the value of such indeterminism remains questionable.

### ***Does Indeterminism Enhance Responsibility and Control?***

Determinism does not give one ultimate control over one's choices; ultimately they result from factors one does not control, such as laws of nature or divine decree. However, it is not clear that the addition of indeterminism can help, whether it arises from physics or not. Dictionary definitions suggest that to control something is to direct, guide or restrain it. To determine something is to direct it to a certain, fixed outcome and so fully control it. To the extent that something is not determined it is not fully directed and restrained and so not fully controlled. How can we fully control something if *nothing* determines exactly what it will be? Given an undetermined choice between right and wrong it therefore seems that there is a chance we will choose rightly and a

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23 Torrance, A. 'Developments in Neuroscience and Human Freedom: Some theological and philosophical questions.'

24 Swinburne R. *The Evolution of the Soul*, Oxford: Clarendon (1986), p. 233.

25 Lucas, J, *The Freedom of the Will*, Oxford: Clarendon (1970), utilises Gödel's Theorem to argue that humans can recognise things to be true which a consistent, algorithmic system cannot prove. This counts only against claims that the human brain functions merely as a consistent, algorithmic system. Human thinking seems less consistent and more complex than this.

chance we will choose wrongly, but ultimately nothing determines which. It is ultimately a matter of chance.<sup>26</sup> Ultimate control over our choices continues to elude us, even if indeterminism is true.

Adding indeterminism seems only to inject an element of luck or chance into the decision-making process, rather than to increase one's control over it. The libertarian is committed to the indeterministic formation of a particular intention, but ultimately the formation of this particular intention *cannot have been intended*, on pain of an infinite regress. If there were a prior intention, we would have to ask how *that* intention was formed, and so on, *ad infinitum*. There must therefore be an intention formed without a prior intention, that is, an intention that formed indeterministically and that cannot be explained by reference to any prior intention. Indeterministic happenings that are not intended are a matter of luck or chance, so our indeterministic formation of a right intention rather than a wrong one is ultimately a matter of luck or chance, not something we intended or fully controlled. The only way to avoid this conclusion would be if a right intention could produce or cause itself. Torrance<sup>27</sup> suggests that there may be some limited form of self-causation, but the idea of a particular intention producing itself seems incoherent; the particular intention would have to be already formed in order to form itself.<sup>28</sup> Torrance appeals to the idea of complex entities that possess causal power vis-à-vis the molecular components from which they emerge,<sup>29</sup> but this is a case of a complex whole affecting its parts, rather than something producing itself. We are left with our formation of a right intention rather than a wrong one being ultimately a matter of luck or chance, not something we intended or fully controlled.

Our overview confirms the impression that libertarians have problems providing a case for indeterministic action, let alone a case for indeterminism that enhances responsibility and control. On the other hand, the compatibilist contributors have done little to deal with the loss of the free-will defence and the question of why we should be punished for determined sin but God should not be blamed for it.

In the rest of the paper I argue that abandoning the free-will defence may not be such a big loss; libertarian free will does not distance God from responsibility for sin as far as one might think. I then outline possible strategies for justifying the punishment of predetermined wrongdoing and God's acceptance of sin.

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26 See van Inwagen, P. 'Freewill remains a mystery,' Chapter 7 of Kane's *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* for development of this sort of argument.

27 Torrance, *op.cit.*[23]

28 See Strawson, G. 'Dreams of Final Responsibility', Chapter 19 of Kane's *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, for rigorous deployment of this sort of argument.

29 Torrance, *op.cit.*[23]

## Weaknesses in the free-will defence

Explaining evil by appeal to the value of libertarian free-will is easy and popular, but it is questionable how much of an advantage it really gives.

### ***Is the Possibility of Wrongdoing Really So Valuable?***

The possibility of choosing wrongly seems to be a weakness or imperfection, not something intrinsically desirable or valuable. In itself, the possibility of choosing badly seems a bad thing. The possibility of choosing rightly or wrongly is not the freedom Christianity ascribes to God. This suggests that Christians cannot think it overwhelmingly valuable.

Some claim that real, 'non-robotic' love requires the possibility of rejection. Unfortunately, this does not cohere with Trinitarian doctrine. Surely, the Persons of the Trinity love one another without possibility of rejection? Is the love of the Father, Son and Spirit then unreal or robotic? If God necessarily loves then is his love unreal? Christians usually claim that God's love is paradigmatically real and the possibility of rejecting God seems undesirable.

The appeal to freedom alone does not even explain why God allows much of the evil in the world; we do not normally think that we should respect people's freedom to harm others. We are usually willing to intervene and remove an agent's freedom in order to prevent them harming others, so why does God not do the same?

Even if it is maintained that the possibility of wrongdoing is inseparable from something that is valuable, given the attendant drawbacks it seems doubtful that it is so essential or valuable that God had to give it.

### ***How far does Libertarianism distance God from Sin?***

Libertarianism might seem to allow God to act with the mere *possibility* of evil, rather than its actual occurrence. However, given the huge number of people, the probability that none would sin seems negligible. Additionally, many decisions, such as Hitler's ordering the Final Solution, or the making of evil plans for later implementation, lead to actual evil only if God concurs through consciously sustaining the sinners and the natural processes in existence. God concurs so that evil actually occurs.

Furthermore, God knowingly created people with a probability of sinning and is deliberately sustaining sinners and all their powers in existence. Our choices, even if not determined, do not arise *ex nihilo*, but are *motivated* by motives ultimately contributed by God, not us. Our motives thus partially explain our choices, and so responsibility does not terminate with our choice; God is therefore *actively* involved in sin through providing motives. Talk of God 'merely permitting' sin thus neglects God's deliberate activity in creating potential sinners and sustaining actual sinners and their instruments.

One might respond that God cannot be held responsible for the actions of free agents, but one can be responsible for delegating responsibility to unreliable people, or knowingly assisting wrongdoers. God's creating unreliable people and sustaining sinners and their instruments as they sin looks similar, so the issue of God's responsibility for sin remains.

Thus, while one might be shocked by the thought of God's controlling all the good and evil in the world, one should still be troubled by the thought of God's risking even more evil and less good through creating and sustaining undetermined, unreliable agents.

### ***Does Libertarian free-will explain all evil?***

Given a modern, scientific picture of the world, free-will does not plausibly explain many natural evils, as, for example, earthquakes, famines, diseases beyond human control, and much animal suffering. The suffering of higher animals for the aeons before the advent of humans would seem to constitute a significant part of the problem of evil, but not to be caused by humans. Natural evils seem to result from the same laws of nature that cause natural goods.

Similarly, many evils, although caused by humans, are caused through insanity, passion, weakness, ignorance, or by accident. Even when people *are* culpable, their sins can cause disproportionate and unforeseen consequences.

It therefore seems that Libertarianism, not just compatibilism, leaves uncomfortable questions about God's responsibility for evil.

### ***Is all inequality due to human free will?***

Christian compatibilists are often criticised for portraying God as favouring people unequally, but Libertarianism does not itself explain how God favours everyone equally, either in this life or the one to come. There are huge inequalities in people's natural talents, gifts and access to resources that seem not to result from human free-will.

Similarly, the assumption of libertarian free-will does not explain why God seems to have chosen to distribute the Gospel in an unequal and highly particular way, apparently favouring some over others.

Thus, in forgoing appeal to libertarian free-will, compatibilists are certainly not abandoning an indisputable or comprehensive explanation of sin, evil or inequality. Furthermore, they may still be able to suggest responses to the theoretical problems posed by sin.

## Determinism and sin

### *The problem of punishment*

One might accept that the institution of punishment serves socially desirable purposes, such as deterring antisocial behaviour, but think it unfair to impose penalties on people for things they were determined to do. A major issue for compatibilists is therefore to justify punishing people for crimes issuing from factors ultimately beyond their control and to provide a retributive account of punishment, wherein punishment of wrongdoers is seen as in some way a deserved 'repayment'. This can be done when it is realised that, even given determinism, voluntary wrongdoers willingly prefer their own interests to the rights of others and the common good. In so doing wrongdoers gain benefits unavailable to law-abiding citizens, such as increased freedom to do as they please or take what they want, or avoid burdens that the law-abiding must bear, such as caring for others. This is an unfair advantage and requires steps to restore a just balance between criminals and law-abiding people. It is therefore fair that criminals be deprived of benefits, in order to remove the unfair advantage they have gained over law-abiding citizens who have restrained themselves and limited their self-interest for the sake of the common good and the rights of others.<sup>30</sup> Retributive punishment can thus be seen as a fair redistribution of the burdens and benefits of living in society, so that voluntary wrongdoers do not gain advantages over those who abide by the rules. Punishment deprives voluntary wrongdoers of benefits, freedoms and psychological satisfactions proportionate to those they have gained by breaking the law, through such means as fines, imprisonment or community service. Wrongdoers thus lose their unfair advantage over law-abiding citizens and repay their 'debt' to society. Given that punishment is thus fair and just, it can serve to benefit the whole society by deterring additional crimes and providing opportunities for reform and so on.

In similar fashion, sin can be seen as avoiding the burdens of loving and serving God and neighbour, imposing burdens on them and thus gaining unfair advantages. Divine judgement then imposes penalties and burdens to remove this unfair advantage over the righteous. Further comment on divine distribution of benefits and burdens is offered below.

The usual sources of our behaviour allow us to pursue our interests in response to our reasons, values, purposes and preferences and so act willingly and voluntarily in a full sense. Some abnormal causes, which might be termed '*excusing causes*', such as compulsive desires, external forces and extreme emotions, can reduce the extent to which behaviour is willing, voluntary and responsive to our reasons, values, purposes and preferences: for example, klep-

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30 See Finnis, J. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon (1979), pp. 260-64 for an influential account of this kind of retributive theory.

tomaniacs will steal even though they recognise convincing reasons not to. One therefore will typically not gain the benefits, freedoms and psychological satisfactions that one would if one's behaviour were caused in the normal, fully voluntary way. The penal practices appealed to above must therefore be adjusted accordingly. Nevertheless, we would expect people not to gain from their anti-social behaviour. For example, someone who compulsively stole things would have to return them.

Compatibilists can thus argue that justifiable punishment merely requires freedom from abnormal, 'excusing causes', not freedom from *all* causes and inability. We can therefore be held to account for determined wrongdoing, provided it is reasonably voluntary and willing, resulting from our own, natural, pursuit of unfair advantage and not from excusing causes. Even if God ultimately determines how we choose, this need not excuse sinful behaviour; his activity in creating and sustaining us does not make our behaviour any less voluntary or mean that God should not remove the unfair advantages we have gained by avoiding the burdens of love.<sup>31</sup>

This compatibilist account of punishment seems attractive compared to one invoking indeterminism in that it does not leave the institution of punishment dependent upon the disputed existence of libertarian freedom. We now turn to the question of why God would accept sin in his world at all.

### ***Divine Incomprehensibility***

It is not clear that the believer needs an explanation of evil.<sup>32</sup> Providing that one reasonably believes that God could be justified in accepting evil, one might reasonably take grounds for belief in God as grounds for belief that there are reasons justifying God's acceptance of evil, even though we do not know what they are. We have an incomplete grasp of the goods and evils in creation and of the logical relations among them, so we might easily overlook justifications. Furthermore, God is in a very different situation from us, so our moral intuitions may be unfitted to judging him. This need not imply wholesale scepticism about our moral intuitions, which seem broadly adequate for mundane situations, just as Newtonian mechanics are adequate for low velocities, but not luminal ones. Suffering for which we can see no reason is an opportunity for exercising humility, faithful perseverance and identification with Jesus' questioning on the cross.

Not knowing God's justification for evil may thus not imply that there is no such justification; we might well not know God's justification even if there were one. Positive grounds for faith could thus outweigh the questionable appear-

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<sup>31</sup> Note that since God creates *ex nihil* and can produce changes immediately, at will, his activity is very unlike that of human determiners who must act by exerting force on pre-existing material.  
<sup>32</sup> This is discussed in Howard-Snyder, D. (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (1996).

ance of unjustified evil. Nevertheless, many feel driven to seek possible explanations for evil in God's world.

### ***Possible explanations of evil***

Natural events come about through orderly, intelligible, causal processes. Plausibly human choices arise through the interaction of such processes with psychological ones. Such processes, physical and psychological, are essentially good, manifesting awe-inspiring order, intricacy and creativity. They produce beauty, life, experience, knowledge, skill, society and intelligent activity furthering good and averting potential evil, which are plausibly goods. Arguably, it is good that natural processes are thus fruitful, generating goods through their own power. God shows respect and patience by empowering his creation to evolve according to its own potentialities, and arguably this too, is good. However, this natural order sometimes causes evils.

God need not directly intend these evils. They can be an undesired but inevitable side effect of God's good intention to create and sustain a causal order realising special kinds of goodness. If certain goods logically entail evil then this could explain why God must accept evil as a consequence of realising them. Such causal responsibility for evil does not entail culpability; one may arguably cause evil necessary to an important good, if one has the right. A doctor might amputate a diseased limb to save its owner's life. We thus proceed to outline what some of these special goods that logically entail evils might be.

#### *Virtuous responses to evil*

Virtuous responses to evil, such as forgiveness, healing, compassion, tolerance, perseverance, patience, courage, self-sacrifice, righteous indignation, retribution, rehabilitation and correction are arguably special forms of good that God might value.

#### *The need for knowledge*

It also seems possible to use Swinburne's argument from *The Need for Knowledge* to help explain evil choices.<sup>33</sup> Swinburne argues that praiseworthy action to avert or virtuously respond to evil requires justified beliefs about such evils. Further, it is good that creatures develop these beliefs through their *own* choices and experiences, rather than through quasi-miraculous means that would make God's existence inescapable. A predictable, natural order is necessary to predict future evils from past experiences. This means that evils must occur in comprehensible, predictable ways, rather than as would be ideal for the formation of virtue and knowledge in particular individuals.

Swinburne aims to show how experience of *natural* evil provides such

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33 Swinburne, R. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998), chapter 10.

knowledge, but allows that much moral growth is produced by reflection upon our own experiences and the experiences of others caused by the deliberate actions of others. Thus, wrongdoing provides knowledge so that people can learn for themselves to avoid and prevent and counteract such evils.

### *God's virtuous responses to evil*

More importantly, while humans do not respond virtuously to all evil, God does. Human sinfulness allows God to show his unmerited grace, forgiveness, healing, faithfulness, patience, self-sacrifice, righteous indignation, retribution, education and correction through salvation and judgement. God thus displays aspects of his grace and power that he could not in a sinless world. Redeemed sinners, unlike those who have never sinned, have been saved from ruin at a price and are dependent on God's forgiveness. They therefore have things for which to praise God that those who never sinned do not.

### *Heaven*

God can reward virtuous responses to evil with glory, honour and eternal life (e.g. Rom. 2.6-10) and praising God's victory over evil is an important component of Heaven (Luke 15.7; Rev.5.8-14, 18.20). Arguably, the glory and honour due to virtuous responses to evil is distinct from that due to creative action not involving evil, just as the honour given to war heroes is distinct from that given to artists. Evil is thus necessary for divine and human virtuous responses to evil, and for the everlasting reward and celebration of these virtues in Heaven. 'Momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor. 4.17).

Thus, in offering explanations for God's acceptance of evil, compatibilists might appeal to the value of human virtuous responses to evil, the need for knowledge for responsible activity, God's virtuous responses to evil, and the celebration and reward of responses to evil in Heaven. All of these goods logically entail evil.

### **God's right to cause evils**

God's causing suffering to benefit others can seem unfair. Swinburne has responded that God, as benefactor, has a right to expect service, by analogy with parents and the government having some right to obedience.<sup>34</sup> God's responsibility for one's whole being, including one's will, may also give him more rights over one's life than any state. In addition, Swinburne claims that one is benefited if one's suffering serves a good purpose: one's life gains usefulness and meaning. To support this contention he appeals to the worth of service and self-sacrifice in Classical and Christian thought, to the fact that people

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<sup>34</sup> Swinburne *op. cit.* [33], p.228

recognise that being unemployed or useless is a bad thing, and to people's desire that their suffering will not be useless.

M. Adams suggests that undeserved suffering may allow sympathy or mystical identification with Jesus' suffering, recognised as meaningful and valuable in the next world. Julian of Norwich believed that God will thank the elect for suffering, and that this gratitude will be a great benefit to them.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, the fellowship and communion of Heaven suggests that the benefit of one benefits all. It therefore seems arguable that God has some right to cause undeserved suffering, and that sufferers will eventually see a benefit from it themselves.

### **Value Judgements**

One might complain that the goods listed above are outweighed by the evils they entail, and so cannot justify them. However, traditional Christianity values self-sacrificial love very highly, and the Atonement is the paradigm case of such (e.g. Rom.5.7-8). Swinburne argues that, while secular morality tends to rate pleasure and pain most important, on reflection we also want to make a meaningful contribution and live useful, worthwhile lives. He thinks that one freed from carnal desires would value 'Being-Of-Use' still more. Because of our sinfulness we may undervalue service and virtue in comparison to worldly pleasures.<sup>36</sup>

Even if the splendour of the created order, growth in knowledge, and virtuous responses to evil, and the celebration and reward of these in Heaven seemed inadequate individually, one might argue that these values cohere in an integrated whole. A quasi-aesthetic, global judgement from the divine perspective could reveal that creation's evils do not outweigh its value as an integrated totality.

More fundamentally, objective weighing up of the relevant goods and evils may be impossible. There seems no common denominator, objective scale or rational criteria by which goods and evils of such different kinds can be commensurated and compared. Therefore one might argue that God could reasonably choose these goods and accept the evils they entail, without claiming that this world is objectively better than worlds lacking these evils but also lacking these goods. Talk of 'better' in such cases would express subjective preference rather than objective principle. Similarly, one might argue that one might reasonably attempt a heroic feat, accepting the suffering this entails, without claiming that it is objectively more reasonable to choose this rather than less intrepid, but safer, options.

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35 Adams, M.M. 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,' in Adams, M.M. & Adams, R.M. (eds.) *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1990), pp. 209-221.

36 Swinburne, *op. cit.* [33], chapter 13

It therefore seems that resources remain to combat the problem of evil, even if libertarianism is abandoned.

### **Hell**

Given compatibilism, if any go to Hell, then this results from God's decision, even if he does not directly intend or intrinsically desire it. This is obviously deeply disturbing. Predestination is traditionally a mystery (Rom.11.33-38), but there may be considerations that show that it is not obviously indefensible.

The idea of hell is particularly threatening to doctrines of God's love and justice if it involves unlimited, infinite suffering. Such infinite suffering threatens to outweigh any good, to be disproportionate to any wrongdoing and to make the creature's existence an unmitigated evil.

However, even unending torment need not imply an *unlimited sum* of evil. Using a mathematical analogy, if the intensity decreases in proportion with elapsed time then the total can approach a *finite* sum. The penalty suffered could be proportioned to unjust liberties, satisfactions and advantages gained through breaking God's laws.

The unsaved could have objectively valuable lives although excluded from the presence of God; they can share in non-divine goods, play a role in many morally significant situations, provide knowledge about unbelief and its consequences and live meaningful, useful lives. Their suffering might involve regret and sorrow and shame for their sin, and thus itself constitute a virtuous response to evil. These experiences would be unpleasant, but valuable. God could thus remain generous and merciful to the lost, giving them an existence that one might reasonably accept.

So long as he has given people a reasonably valuable life, the creator has the right to make some creatures for different ends from others (Romans 9:21 'Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?') In not creating someone for eternal life, God might have made them better, but there seems no maximum to the benefits God can bestow on a creature, even if unique creatures can be directly compared. It therefore seems incoherent to require God to give his creatures the best possible life, for a best possible life seems an incoherent idea, akin to a highest possible number.

Inequality is encountered in nature and in Scripture. God is described as loving some more than others (Rom.9.13, cf. Mal. 1.3). Traditionally, God elects some nations and people for special burdens and privileges, based on his free grace.<sup>37</sup> Granting that God gives a reasonably valuable life to all, arguably he is not being unjust to those who do not enter heaven, merely generous to those

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<sup>37</sup> See e.g. 'Election', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York: Doubleday (1992), pp. 434-444.

who do. Many would grant that nobody has *earned* a right to heaven, and that God is not indebted to anyone. Moreover, he has not promised to give heaven to everyone, merely to those that believe in him, and not everyone wants to do this. Heaven is not an absolute requirement for a worthwhile existence. Rather, heaven is a gift that God can give as he pleases, as is the grace that makes one willing to receive it.

There is a temptation in a modern, egalitarian society to assume that God must love everyone in the very same way. However, we do not usually think that it is wrong to love someone in a special way, to marry someone, for example, or to adopt them as a child. Talk of God as Father would suggest that he has a special love for all his children, but this language primarily describes Christians, who are adopted into God's family, not all people by nature (Eph.1.5, 1 John 3.1) and God is also the sovereign creator. Thus one might argue that God is free to love some people in a special way. Therefore it may be that there is no wrong on God's part in not giving heaven to everyone, especially as not everyone wants it.

'God desires all to be saved' (1 Tim. 2.4) but other texts suggest that God does not choose all for the kingdom (e.g. Prov. 16.4, Matt. 11.25, 13.11, 22.14; John 9.31; Rom. 9.18; 1 Pet. 2.8). Perhaps God saves believers in a special sense (1 Tim. 4.10?), or chooses not to act on his desire to save everyone in order to act on other, incompatible desires, just as many libertarians hold that God desires to respect free-will as well as desiring all to be saved, and that the two desires can conflict. Perhaps God chose to manifest goods incompatible with his desire for all to accept him, such as his love to those who never reciprocate it, his respect for the decision to reject him, his righteous judgement against unrepented sin, or to emphasise his sovereign mercy to the elect (cf Rom. 9.22-3).

Given divine incomprehensibility, one would not expect fully to grasp God's reasons. Particular decisions to elect some but not others, although not dependent on personal merits, need not be capricious, but could be justified by their fit with God's other intentions and overall plans.

Thus it seems that compatibilists could defend a moderate doctrine of hell in the context of God's giving a valuable life to all, and heaven to all who accept it.

## **Conclusion**

Indeterministic, Libertarian freewill offers an explanation for sin, is initially plausible, and many Christians have been brought up on it. However, modern science has done little to show that we have it, and philosophical reflection makes it doubtful that it is of overriding value. Indeterminism does not appear to enhance control and responsibility, nor does free-will explain all the evil and inequality we see in the world. Conversely, a compatibilist version of free-will and responsibility is easier to reconcile with modern science, but offers no help

with the problem of evil. Nevertheless, compatibilists can justify punishment in terms of its removing unfair advantages gained by willing wrongdoers and so aiding society. They can suggest that evil is an undesirable side effect of creating a cosmos containing goods logically presupposing evil. Heaven can be seen as an undeserved gift; God is not necessarily unjust or unloving to those to whom he does not give it. Neuroscientific determinism may not give the problem of evil the final word.

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Patrick Richmond is chaplain and fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge.

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