

Free Will in Analytic Theology

Richard Tamburro – Kevin Timpe*

Section 1: What is Analytic Theology

Even though they didn't always use the same terminology that we currently do (and in some cases, didn't use the language of 'free will' at all), many philosophers have been interested in what we now refer to as the metaphysics of free will. For over 2000 years free will has also been a major topic of theological reflection in the traditions of the West's major monotheisms (i.e., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism). In what follows, we'll speak primarily of Christianity, as that is the theological tradition that we're most familiar with. But much of what we will say will also apply to theological reflection on Judaism and Islam as well, and perhaps even some eastern traditions.

Of course, theology's interest in free will is not unconnected with philosophy's interest in the same. Many of the issues which motivate interest are the same across both disciplines – issues related to responsibility, desert, punishment, meaning, autonomy, human nature, causation, agency, action, etc. But, in an unfortunate trend that has been noted by a number of scholars in both of these fields, too often those engaged with reflection on free will in these two disciplines have not interacted with work from the other discipline in the ways that their shared interests would suggest would be mutually beneficial. Our goal in this brief article is to note points of connection and to indicate some select sources for further reading.

In recent years there's been a flurry of work at the intersection of philosophy and theology. Often going by the name "analytic theology". William Abraham goes so far as to refer to «the emergence of analytic theology as a natural development within

* Richard Tamburro, Westside School of Theology, 10500 SW Nimbus Ave, Portland, OR 97140 USA; e-mail: richardtamburro@gmail.com – Kevin Timpe, Northwest Nazarene University, 623 S. University Blvd, Nampa, ID 83686 USA; e-mail: ktimpe@nnu.edu.

[the broader scope of] analytic philosophical theology»¹. Michael Rea describes analytic theology as follows:

«Roughly (and I think that “rough” is the best that we can do here), [the term “analytic philosophy”] refers to an approach to philosophical problems that is characterized by a particular rhetorical style, some common ambitions, and evolving technical vocabulary, and a tendency to pursue some projects in dialogue with a certain evolving body of literature... As I see it, analytic theology is just the activity of approaching theological topics with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher and in a style that conforms to the prescriptions that are distinctive of analytic philosophical discourse»².

As with other broad scholarly movements, defining analytic theology in a way that cleanly demarcates it from other similar philosophical and theological approaches is difficult. We think it's best not to see analytic theology as distinct from analytic philosophy of religion, but rather as part of it³.

Section 2: Issues Involving Free Will in Analytic Theology

Now that the wider context is (hopefully) sketched, we turn then toward theological topics that intersect centrally with issues related to free will, and about which future work in analytic theology would be worthwhile. There are a number of interesting intersects where our philosophical commitments may constrain the development of contemporary formulations of doctrine, and contrariwise where our doctrinal commitments may limit our philosophical thinking. We explore one such issue in greater detail in the third section.

An obviously important, and perennial, issue involving free will is God's providential control. If God is in control of everything, ordering it as He wills, then it is difficult to see what prospects there could be for all creaturely agency not to be instrumental. A version of van Inwagen's Consequence Argument would seem to rule out human freedom and responsibility here. There are a number of non-determining options such as open theism, simple foreknowledge, or even Molinism⁴. But there might be a kind of Consequence-style Argument to deploy against the Molinist too.

¹ W. J. ABRAHAM, *Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine*, in *Journal of Analytic Theology* 1 (2013) 3.

² M. C. REA (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, Oxford 2009, 3 and 7.

³ For more on this, see K. TIMPE, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, New York-London 2013, ch. 1 and Id., *On Analytic Theology*, in *Scientia et Fides* 3/2 (2015) 1-13.

⁴ For introductory surveys of options, see T. P. FLINT – M. REA, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Oxford 2009 and M. C. REA (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, cit.

In this context, it's not surprising that the recent philosophical and theological work exploring open theism often takes libertarianism as a central motivation. One could perhaps reject the soundness of Consequence-style Arguments and endorse compatibilism. But that would, in our view, make a few of the other issues mentioned below to be even more problematic.

Concerns about compatibilism come to the fore with the free will defense to the problem of evil. This a matter of ensuring that the buck stops with free creatures, rather than God, when it comes to explaining the origin of moral evil. Many think this move commits one to a libertarian theory of free will. Although this is well-trodden territory in the philosophy of religion, there are interesting problems surrounding the inception of evil for analytic theologians⁵. If God created creatures that were wholly good, we might ask from whence the primal sin came. How did good agents come to posses and utilize the ability to do wrong? This is a question about the explanation, and possibly causal conditions, of free actions. There is a tension in the philosophical landscape between theories of free will that tend towards compatibilism, wherein there would be a concern that God is the cause of the primal sin, and those that tend towards libertarianism, wherein the concern is that the primal sin might be a matter of bad luck⁶. The latter option would make it difficult to explain how the primal sin was willful rebellion (for example a matter of pride, as Augustine has it) and how agents are responsible for it, however the former option puts pressure on an explanation of why the first creatures are responsible for the primal sin if their involvement is instrumental. On either approach, the explanation of the primal sin is interestingly difficult.

The cognate problem to the primal sin is original sin⁷. There are a variety of formulations of this doctrine, but these are some of the issues a coherent formulation must deal with. Original sin normally commits one to the claim that it is inevitable that agents sin, at least once. On some formulations the stronger claim is made: that it is necessarily false that agents can fail to sin. Either way the inability to avoid sin is a serious challenge for the fair attribution of responsibility for those sins, particularly if one is committed to a connection between responsibility and libertarian free will. And what is the scope of free will if agents are not free not to sin? If they are held captive by influences beyond their control what does this say about the freedom of their will? On most formulations of the doctrine original sin is not only about an agent's current capacities to sin or not, but concerns whether they were born a sin-

⁵ See the introduction to K. TIMPE – D. SPEAK (eds.), *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, Oxford 2016.

⁶ See K. TIMPE, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, cit., and K. ROGERS, *Anselm on Freedom*, Oxford 2008.

⁷ See M. C. REA, *The metaphysics of original sin*, in D. ZIMMERMAN – P. VAN INWAGEN (eds.), *Persons: Human and Divine*, Oxford 2007, 319-356.

ner – blameworthy before they had committed any post-natal action. This challenges analytic theologians to present a theory of freedom and responsibility upon which agents can merit desert for an event that predates their birth.

If we begin to think about the interaction of the divine upon human agency, issues surrounding free will and the atonement come into view⁸. There has been a hard fought battle ever since Pelagius about whether the transformation between sinner and saved is one that human agency stands in some important relation to as efficient cause. The Augustinian position promotes grace as doing (nearly) all the work, and Pelagius puts human free choice at the fountainhead (even though he did not deny divine grace, as is sometimes claimed). Calvinists and Arminians have engaged in the same debate, as do their theological progeny. There are some interesting contemporary suggestions about how to synthesize these concerns without either denying a particular brand of original sin, or becoming compatibilists and these theories connect to the varieties of grace theologians have developed. This is another case of theology providing a puzzle in which the coherence of our philosophical thinking about agency is put to a stern test.

Once the agent is saved, the explanatory challenge is not over. Unless we claim that human agency is rendered instrumental by the divine influence of grace (in which case we might wonder why there is still sin) we still face the challenge of how God can interact with humans in a sanctifying way, without treading their freedom underfoot (we could also talk about the metaphysics of theosis and deification). Here the influence is not merely to help us by giving us more resources, or greater opportunity to do the right thing (a weak theory of sanctification), but involves a transformative process with God as the external efficient cause. This transformative process culminates in glorification in heaven, and purgatory may provide another interesting set of conditions in which to understand agency⁹. But on Earth, or elsewhere, God is not the only cause, and the cooperation and interaction between human and divine agency is really the issue at stake, both here and in the atonement (as well as in a vast number of doctrines, such as inspiration). These theological conditions push our theories into difficult test cases about the attribution of agency and responsibility, and there are interesting connections to recent work in the philosophy of group agency for analytic theologians to explore here.

Perhaps the best place for analytic theologians to start their reflections on the interaction of divine and human agency is the incarnation¹⁰. Christ had, according

⁸ See C. P. RAGLAND, *The trouble with quiescence: Stump on grace and freedom*, in *Philosophia Christi* 8/2 (2006) 343-362 and E. STUMP, *Aquinas*, New York 2003.

⁹ See J. WALLS, *Purgatory*, Oxford 2011.

¹⁰ See T. PAWL, *A Solution to the Fundamental Philosophical Problem of Christology*, in *The Journal of Analytic Theology* 2 (2014) 61-85 and O. CRISP, *Divinity and Humanity*, Cambridge 2007.

to the ecumenical creeds, a human and a divine will. And there is something about this arrangement that smacks of schizophrenia to some. A lot of how much of a puzzle this is depends on our model of the incarnation (no problem for full kenosis for example). But given that Christ is supposed to assume everything that needs healing, including our human faculties of free agency, there does seem to be a puzzle about how to synthesize the divine and human agency, and this is provoked by the result of perichoresis: that the human will cannot sin because of the “influence” of the divine. The psychology of the incarnate Christ provides the ultimate test of a theory of free will.

Reflection on the incarnation reveals an analogous problem for social trinitarians especially¹¹. In the Trinity we have three persons who necessarily share the same “will” (though perhaps object of will would be more accurate). Quite why this should be so is an interesting metaphysical puzzle, though highly speculative, about divine psychology and agency. But if we are in any sense committed to divine freedom, and if freedom is a property of persons (not godheads) then the way that these three persons are able to interact is another challenging case of what is sometimes called cooperative willing (after cooperative grace). This also connects interestingly to contemporary work on group agency.

Lastly, if freedom is a good-making property, then we might expect God to possess it. Some theologians are wont to proclaim that God did not *have* to create the world, or even redeem fallen creation. But given God’s other perfections, we might think that upon assessing the moral, practical, prudential etc. reasons there are for any range of possible actions, these reasons would commit (cause) God to perform only one of these actions. In other words, God is not free¹². There is a kind of Euthyphro problem here threatening divine aseity. Perhaps these reasons are internal to God (simplicity) and so this is not as much of a threat of God being forced into a choice as it might first appear. Or perhaps freedom is not good for God, but then we had better assess what criteria we use to evaluate free will as good, either instrumentally or intrinsically, a question of vital importance for theorists interested in the defense of a particular conception of free will.

Section 3:

Above, we mentioned a number of ways that human freedom relates to a number of theological topics. In this final section, we want to explore in a bit more detail than

¹¹ See M. C. REA (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, cit. and S. T. DAVIS ET AL., *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, Oxford 2002.

¹² See W. ROWE, *Can God Be Free?*, Oxford 2004.

in the previous section how one might, in the spirit of analytic theology, understand human freedom in the afterlife.

Such reflection will require exploring at least two theological doctrines related to eschatology, that part of theology that reflects on “last things”, namely heaven and hell. Consider the latter first. If hell is a place that is inescapable because there is no exercise of agency that could be the basis of a means of redemption and escape, then agents seem similarly trapped by an inability to will something – their repentance¹³. This presents a question about the scope and possibility of freedom, but also poses an interesting challenge to explain why it should be the case that there are some things that an agent can will on earth, but cannot will in hell. There are a number of ways that one might argue that individuals in hell are free yet still not able to repent. One option is compatibilism, according to which human free will is compatible with the individual to will (or not will) in a particular way. While such a view might easily provide a solution to the present problem, neither of us are compatibilists; furthermore, we each think that if compatibilism were true, it would raise significant problems for other theological issues. How might one reconcile human freedom, understood as incompatible with determinism, with the traditional doctrine of hell? Suppose, one’s character puts constraints on what one is able to freely choose. Suppose, for example, that one can only freely choose what one sees as good in some way or other. If those in hell are sufficiently antagonistic toward God such that they see no good in turning toward him, it could be the case that those people who are in hell are unable to escape, despite retaining their free will. The damned’s inability to turn to God is the result of their having skewed their character by their previous acts of will, not because of anything about God or God’s character¹⁴.

Traditional theological reflection on heaven presents a similar potential problem. According to traditional theological views, those in heaven necessarily cannot sin, and a similar explanation about how freedom is limited, but apparently not destroyed, is called for¹⁵. Perhaps there is no freedom in heaven or hell and yet we might plausibly think that freedom should not be destroyed given that the free will defense commits us to free will being a great good. Explaining why the scope of agency changes between Earth and heaven and hell, including the effects of the beatific vision, provides exacting test cases for our philosophical understanding of human and angelic agency. Perhaps knowledge of God gained in the beatific vision, along with new heavenly resources (such as the constant immanent presence of God), is so transformative upon

¹³ A good initial collection on hell is J. BUENTING, J. (ed.), *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, Farnham 2010.

¹⁴ For a further defense of such a view, see K. TIMPE, *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, cit., particularly chapter 5.

¹⁵ See T. PAWL – K. TIMPE, *Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven*, in *Faith and Philosophy* 26/4 (2009) 396-417.

our character and ideas of what is good, that willing something that is actually bad is beyond cognitive possibility. But having secured this necessary sinlessness, if free will is such a great good, does it leave us with any scope for significant and valuable freedom of action in heaven? Or do we need to have the freedom to sin to be significantly free, as some have supposed¹⁶? Well, as long as we are not necessitated by our character and circumstances to make only one choice, because there is always only ever one best course of action, this will not be a problem. This is a question about the role of reasons, goals, projects and self-formation in action production. Given that in heaven good goals for who we will become, and what goods we instantiate, will not be limited by practical and temporal concerns, like on earth, there is good reason to think that there will not only one open best course before us, and thus there can be significant heavenly freedom.

But even then, heaven needs to make sin metaphysically impossible, or we run the risk of another fall (which many traditions see as a naïve slip up). So we still need God to cooperatively interact with agents in a way that can shape their choices to prevent this, and this might be a threat to the possession of freedom at all. One solution to this problem would be to make use of the idea of derivative freedom. Sometimes our freedom of action is curtailed by events beyond our control, including events that involve us, and our free choices, in the past. If we are involved in the right way in the past event that leads to the current constraint upon range of action, we may be held responsible for that state, and be significantly free regarding it, even if we do not currently have any alternative possibilities for action. If a past exercise of freedom involves us in sanctioning just this sort of divine interaction, then the limitation that come with it will not be a threat to freedom. Happily, in Christian theology, the choice to accept salvation includes just such content: that the agent must recognize their inability to deal with sin, depend instead on the grace of God, and submit themselves willingly to God working in them. But perhaps the space to *freely* make such a choice involves being at an epistemic distance from this heavenly knowledge and experience – which raises the possibility of the way forward with another related issue – divine hiddenness.

Conclusion

This overview of ways the metaphysics of free will is relevant to issues in analytic theology is just an incomplete overview, both in terms of the range of issues and in terms of the work being done on each issue. However, it is our hope that this over-

¹⁶ J. F. SENNETT, *Is There Freedom In Heaven?*, in *Faith and Philosophy* 16/1 (1999) 69-82.

view gives a glimpse of the current intersection of these two literatures, and perhaps even inspires future work in their overlap.

Abstract

In recent years, a movement known as Analytic Theology--which attempts to use the methods of analytic philosophy to explore and understand theological topics--has gained considerable momentum. Here, we summarize a number of issues in analytic theology where philosophical reflection on the nature of free will is especially relevant. In particular, we consider a number of interesting insects where philosophical commitments may constrain the development of theological formulations and where doctrinal commitments may limit philosophical thinking. Though not intended to be exhaustive, our list of topics includes providence, the problem of evil, sin, eschatology, grace, and the incarnation. Along the way, we point to some of the secondary literature that provides a good point of departure for these topics.