

Why Christians Should not be Compatibilists: A Response to Baker

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In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy* Lynne Rudder Baker argues that orthodox Christian commitments should rule out libertarian freedom as a feasible option for Christians.¹ In place of libertarian freedom, Baker endorses a compatibilist conception of free will consistent with mainstream interpretations of the mature Augustine. The weight of Baker's argument rests primarily on the claim that orthodox doctrines mainly related to human free will preclude libertarian notions of free will (465-70). My principle contention in this essay is that Baker is mistaken in supposing libertarian freedom is incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. A secondary objective is to show that there are good reasons for Christians to reject compatibilism and to affirm libertarian freedom.

I. Baker's Case

Baker defines compatibilist free will in the following way: "To will X is to have an effective desire to choose or do X, a desire that moves one to choose or to do X. If one has the will that she wants to have (if, that is, one is moved by the desire that she wants to move one), then one has free will as a compatibilist may construe it" (467). She goes on to specify compatibilist free will using the these Frankfurtian distinctions:

- (CFW) A person S has compatibilist free will for a choice or action if:
- (i) S wills X,
 - (ii) S wants to will X,
 - (iii) S wills X because she wants to will X, and
 - (iv) S would still have willed X even if she (herself) had known the provenance of her wanting to will X.

This understanding of freedom, if successful, would allow God to exercise deterministic control over free creatures, while not jeopardizing their freedom and

responsibility. For example, suppose that God gives Julie the effective desire to become a horse jockey. Consequently, Julie wills to become a horse jockey; Julie wants to will to become a horse jockey; Julie wills to become a horse jockey because she wants to will to become a horse jockey; and Julie would still have willed to become a horse jockey even if she (herself) had known the provenance of her wanting to will to become a horse jockey. As it seems, the wills of both God and Julie are done! Baker believes that only given this account of freedom can one maintain certain essential Christian doctrines without falling into heresy or nonsense.

Baker's first argument in favor of compatibilism is that Augustine's doctrine of original sin does not require libertarian freedom. Augustine taught that God created humans free² and perfect. Sadly, humans abused their freedom by sinning, which resulted in the corruption of their free and perfect state. Since the Fall, all humans are born tainted and enslaved to sin. Augustine's doctrine entails that humans are guilty of sin without exercising indeterministic freedom. Not only are humans born into sin-guilt independent of their wills, but Augustine also suggests numerous sins can be committed in ignorance (see Baker 464). If Augustine is right on these points, as Baker claims, then libertarian freedom is irrelevant for one to be culpable of sin.

The doctrine of predestination constitutes Baker's second argument against libertarian freedom. Following Augustine, she takes predestination to mean that God's election of individuals is necessary and sufficient for their salvation. While Baker does not discount the role of human will in salvation, she does claim that the will must work along compatibilist principles in order to harmonize with Augustine's understanding of predestination. She explains that "[t]he desire to do God's will and the desire to will

what is good are effects, not causes, of God's grace. Turning to God is indeed a matter of will, but the will is caused by God to make the turn" (465). Undoubtedly this account of predestination will only work with compatibilistic freedom, thus making libertarian freedom untenable.

The third key doctrine that Baker uses to build her case against libertarian freedom is divine causality. Citing Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, Baker infers that orthodox Christian doctrine teaches that "God must cause the will to will what is good; the will cannot will what is good on its own. . . . God directly causes a person to will what is good" (467). Thus, performing a good act must be entirely in the causal control of God, rather than the human agent. Consequently, libertarian freedom, which requires free agents to act apart from sufficient causal duress, cannot be admitted for any act of a good will. "If God causes a person to will what is good," Baker contends, "it is not within her power to refrain from willing (in the libertarian way) what is good" (467). Moreover, if God sufficiently causes all good wills, then Baker suggests that God sufficiently causes wills that are evil and indifferent, albeit in a different way (468-69). If Baker is correct, then on the basis of divine causality, libertarian freedom cannot exist.

Baker also suggests that libertarian freedom undermines divine providence. She identifies a key component of libertarian freedom is that agents are the ultimate creators or originators of their actions (469). If this is so, then God cannot sufficiently cause agents with libertarian freedom to act precisely as he wills. Moreover, if God cannot cause agents with libertarian freedom to act as he wills, then God does not possess sovereign control over the world. Given that divine causality includes God's meticulous

providential control over all things, Baker finds libertarian free will irreconcilable with Christian orthodoxy.

Baker supplements her theological case with an attempt to undercut what she takes to be four compelling motivations for libertarian free will (470-72). First, she contests the assumption that libertarian freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. Based on the Frankfurtian assumptions stated earlier, Baker believes moral responsibility is compatible with one's will being sufficiently caused by factors external to the agent. Second, she addresses the concern that without libertarian freedom, humans are reduced to puppets. Baker allays this concern by pointing out that her account of compatibilism does not ignore one's will. Rather, humans perform acts based on reasons they want to have, so they aren't reduced to automata.

The third motivation for libertarian freedom that Baker challenges is its usefulness in the alleged problem of evil. She points out that libertarian freedom merely shows that God and evil are logically compatible. Nonetheless, natural evils and capricious moral evils remain inexplicable even with libertarian freedom. In short, Baker contends that libertarian freedom offers little (if any) substantial advantage in resolving the problem of evil.

The final motivation Baker confronts is the intuitive concept of "ought" implies "can." She explains that the statement, "If x ought to do A , then x can do A ," could be analyzed in two ways. Either (i) If x ought to do A , then x can do A independently of God's grace, or (ii) If x ought to do A , then x can do A perhaps only with the grace of God. Taken as (i), this intuition falls into Pelagianism. Interpreted as (ii), there is no conflict with compatibilism as Baker construes it.

These three Christian doctrines and four undercutting motivations for libertarian freedom constitute Baker's case urging Christians to abandon libertarian freedom in favor of compatibilism. Her case, however, possesses fundamental weaknesses, which undermine the strength of her arguments. First, there is the problem of representing the broad Christian consensus on the crucial doctrines to which she appeals. Second, some inherent difficulties of compatibilism exist that could undermine Baker's position. Finally, I will show some ways libertarian freedom is useful for beliefs common to the broad Christian consensus.

II. Problem of Representation

Baker's case rests squarely on the crux that the doctrines to which she appeals (original sin, predestination, and divine causality) pertain to all Christians. While she has successfully pointed to fundamental doctrines that are important to all Christians, a shortcoming of her argument is that the description of these Christian doctrines is remarkably narrow. On the doctrine of original sin, she cites only Augustine to represent Christian orthodoxy. Augustine's position on original sin, however, is a contested strand in theology.³ Alternative orthodox interpretations on original sin can be found among the usual suspects like Menno Simons and John Wesley. Even the reformer Ulrich Zwingli understood original sin differently than Augustine.⁴ Broadly speaking, the view put forward by Zwingli, Simons, and Wesley on original sin denies inherited guilt but accepts inherited depravity as an inevitable propensity to sin. This acceptable alternative can be reconciled with libertarian freedom, for one is not guilty of sin until one commits a sin. This take on original sin accepts both that all people will sin and that when they do sin it is the result of indeterministic free agency.⁵ Thus, libertarian freedom retains its

relevance to the discussion of this important doctrine. More importantly though, Baker has not presented a case that should be convincing to all Christians. At best, she has shown that Augustinians should be compatibilists, which is a hollow victory.

Regarding the doctrine of predestination, we find that Baker's characterization of this doctrine is representative only of a small strand within Christian orthodoxy. Once again, her case is substantiated solely by citations from Augustine (although she correctly mentions without citation the agreement of Thomas Aquinas, several reformers, and Jonathan Edwards),⁶ which represents only one segment of the multitudinous landscape of understandings of predestination. Baker takes for granted that predestination is individual, rather than corporate, which is a debatable claim amongst theologians.⁷ More contentious is her claim that divine predestination provides causally sufficient grounds for one to be saved. Indeed, Baker's position at best represents only a fragment of the wide range of viable Christian understandings of predestination. An impressive list of orthodox theologians from the Catholic counterreformationist Luis de Molina⁸ to Calvin's disciple Jacob Arminius⁹ to John Wesley¹⁰ and up to numerous contemporary theologians¹¹ work under a doctrine of predestination that is consistent with libertarian freedom. Once again, Baker has only shown that libertarian freedom is inconsistent with theologians whose views entail a compatibilistic concept of freedom, which is an unsurprising discovery.

Like Baker's expositions on original sin and predestination, the scope of her description on the doctrine of divine causality does not accurately represent the broad Christian consensus of this important doctrine. She only cites Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther to substantiate the position that all Christians should accept the view

that God sufficiently causes all wills that are good. This careful selection neglects a wide variety of Christian views. A more modest understanding that seems to represent the overall Christian account of divine causality teaches that God provides causally necessary (although not sufficient) conditions for one to have a good will. Moreover, even among Calvinists, the notion of *common grace* could arguably provide room for people to choose what is good given God's initial providence for such acts.¹² Roughly, common grace could be understood along the following lines: God does not sufficiently cause agents to perform good acts, but God's grace is a necessary condition for any good act to occur. While this may conflict with Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther, there is no reason to suggest it is beyond the realm of Christian orthodoxy.

With this understanding of God's providing necessary, not sufficient, causes, a solution to Baker's worry about providence surfaces. For God could exercise providence over certain necessary conditions requisite for any indeterministically free act to occur, such as which beings exist and in which circumstances they exist. Even granting a robust libertarian freedom, God still possesses significant control over creation without impeding its freedom. Thus, it seems possible for Christians to affirm divine causation in executing providence, while admitting human libertarian freedom.

If Baker's case is intended to persuade Christians to abandon libertarian freedom on the basis of overarching fundamental Christian doctrines, then her case utterly fails. The specific way she understands these vital doctrines turns out only to appeal to one strand in Christian theology, which is already by and large favorable to compatibilism. In order for her case to apply to all Christians, she will need to take into account the

diversity of Christian beliefs that have been viable throughout Christian history and remain to this day.¹³

III. Inherent Difficulties with Compatibilism

The problem of representation, if successful, is strong enough on its own to undercut the applicability of Baker's argument to all Christians. Another line of argument, however, can be taken against Baker's case as well, namely, to reject compatibilism for its inherent difficulties. A number of important critiques have been raised against compatibilism, which cannot be recounted in full here.¹⁴ Instead, I will attempt to give a quick exposition of two of its chief difficulties.

The first difficulty in accepting compatibilism concerns the coherence of the compatibilist's definition of free will. According to compatibilism, a person's free choice is determined by "effective desires" which in turn are caused by God. This move strikes many libertarians as suspicious. The claim "God causes a person to perform a free act" smacks of a semantic sleight of hand. As Alvin Plantinga has noted, this is like claiming "being in jail doesn't really limit one's freedom on the grounds that if one were *not* in jail, he would be free to come and go as he pleased."¹⁵ For similar reasons, William James calls compatibilism "a quagmire of evasion."¹⁶ The very definition of compatibilistic free will seems to conclude in questionable, if not altogether nonsensical, grounds.

Secondly, compatibilism undercuts the grounds for agents to possess rationality.¹⁷ For if sufficient conditions outside of one's will determine one's beliefs, then one's ability to assess and choose arguments based on their cogency ceases to exist. Every person's knowledge has already been sufficiently determined by factors beyond that

person's will. Hence, if compatibilism is true, it would be a mere accident if anyone actually chose to accept any true beliefs (including the belief that compatibilism is true).

If compatibilism were not plagued with forbidding difficulties like the two surveyed above, then surely more Christian philosophers would be willing to consider compatibilism. But given these inherent problems, many will find compatibilism simply is not a live option from the outset.

IV. A Case for Libertarian Freedom

In this final section, I shall attempt to make a brief case for libertarian freedom based on beliefs all Christians should value. My first reason to accept libertarian freedom is that compatibilism strengthens the atheistic argument from evil. Recall that Baker believes libertarian freedom is not of much use to theists for the problem of evil. True, libertarian freedom does not resolve *every* aspect of the problem of evil, but compatibilism certainly makes the situation much worse for theists. For compatibilism affirms that God wills and sufficiently causes the existence of all evils including wars, famines, rapes, and every other atrocity that occurs.¹⁸ If Christians are compatibilists, then the problem of evil is no longer a mystery; it becomes a serious objection. There is good reason to think that given compatibilistic freedom, moral evil is logically irreconcilable with traditional theism.¹⁹ While libertarians recognize that more work needs to be done on the problem of evil, surely libertarian freedom has beneficially advanced rebutting both the logical and evidential forms of the problem. Since the problem of evil seems to be insuperable without libertarian freedom, theists should take libertarian freedom seriously.

Another theological concern that should sway all theists to consider libertarian freedom is the destiny of the damned. If compatibilists are correct in asserting God's sovereign will alone is sufficient for salvation,²⁰ and if God desires all people to be saved,²¹ then all people should be saved. Baker, feeling the weight of this objection, tentatively proposes the possibility of universalism, suggesting this may be feasible through opportunities to receive salvation in the afterlife (472-73). One problem with this move is that no reason exists to believe God will renege his judgment against those who reject his grace. A second problem is that God would force all people to choose to love him, without their free consent, which seems to make God's gracious gift of salvation into a forced act of divine coercion. Third, to suggest on compatibilistic grounds that God will cause people to respond to his grace in the afterlife is at best *ad hoc*. If God's calling is sufficient for salvation, there is no reason why God cannot cause everyone to accept his grace on this side of death.

Libertarian freedom, on the other hand, helps Christians make sense of the doctrine of hell. God, they suggest, respects people's choices; and rather than forcing people to have what they do not will, God allows people to choose hell. Hell's duration may justifiably be eternal, if as Thomas Aquinas has suggested, "There would be no everlasting punishment of the souls of the damned if they were able to change their will for a better will."²²

A final doctrinal concern that all Christians should value is the praiseworthiness of God's providence. On the Augustinian view, God meticulously determines everything to occur by his sovereign will. While this is impressive and beyond the abilities of any being that is not God, I suggest it is not the most praiseworthy account of divine

providence. If one presumes humans possess libertarian freedom, then God cannot order things to occur by divine fiat. Instead, God must use his vast knowledge and power to work with his free creation. This would take maximal wisdom and inscrutable planning on God's behalf for his intended world to obtain. By preserving libertarian freedom, one finds more reasons to marvel at God's providence. Moreover, this reckoning of divine causation can attribute the origin of evil in a less controversial manner to the actions of free agents than accounts of divine providence that presuppose compatibilism. In short, libertarian freedom maximizes God's praiseworthiness and minimizes any blame in his providence and causal relations with the world.

Should Christians be compatibilists or libertarians? Based on Baker's case, I see no reason why Christians who are not already committed to compatibilism will find it persuasive. Indeed, her exposition of the crucial doctrines of original sin, predestination, and divine causation only represent a strand in Christian theology, which is broadly compatibilistic. I suggest that Christians should not be compatibilists because there are inherent difficulties in the very notion of compatibilistic free will. Libertarian freedom, on the other hand, offers considerable advantages regarding beliefs that all Christians should value. Thus, Christians have better reasons to be libertarians than compatibilists.

¹ Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should not be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *Faith and Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2003): 460-78. Hereafter, page numbers to this article will be cited parenthetically.

² While not explicitly stated, "free" seems to indicate this means some type of libertarian freedom. John Calvin, clearly following Augustine, makes the same point. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library

of Christian Classics, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II:955-58. Bk. 3, ch. 23, secs. 7-9.

³ Augustine's formulation of original sin was based on the Vulgate's inaccurate rendering of Romans 5:12 (*in quo omnes peccaverunt*—"in whom [*i.e.*, Adam] all sinned"). The Greek text, however, is significantly different (*eph'hō pantesh ēmarton*—"because [of death] all sinned"). See James R. Edwards, *Romans*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 147-49.

⁴ Ulrich Zwingli, "Declaration of Huldreich Zwingli Regarding Original Sin, Addressed to Urbanus Rhegius," in *On Providence and Other Essays*, ed. William John Hinke (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1983).

⁵ This would connect transworld depravity with original sin. See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 48-53.

⁶ Baker's reference (465) to St. Paul's writing of Romans 9-11 is more complicated than she seems to recognize. For there are numerous orthodox interpretations of this section of Paul's writings many of which are wholly consistent with libertarian freedom. See Andrew H. Wakefield, "Romans 9-11: The Sovereignty of God and the Status of Israel," *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 1 (2003): 65-80.

⁷ For example, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 452-55.

⁸ Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)*, trans. and intro. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁹ Jacob Arminius, "A Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius," in *The Works of Jacob Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), I:581-732.

¹⁰ For example, see John Wesley, "Sermon on Predestination," available online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/JohnWesley/sermons/058.htm>

¹¹ For example, see Grenz (cited above); Paul Fiddes, *Past event and Present Salvation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989); Frank Tupper, *A Scandalous Providence* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); Arthur McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Elizabeth Johnson A, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). In addition to theologians, some Christian philosophers have advanced the possibility for further development in current theology. See William Lane Craig, *Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000); Freddoso, "Introduction," in *Divine Foreknowledge*; Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Also the controversial movement known as open theism, if considered orthodox, would represent a contemporary theological position that accepts both libertarian freedom and predestination. Open theism's landmark work is Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994).

¹² See, for example, Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

¹³ For an example of a theology text aimed specifically at drawing a general consensus on the unity and diversity of Christian belief over the past two millennia see Roger Olson's *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

¹⁴ Peter van Inwagen is probably the most successful critic against compatibilism. See his "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism," *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975): 185-99; idem, "Ability and Responsibility," *The Philosophical Review* 87 (April 1978): 201-24; idem, *An Essay on Free Will* (New York: Oxford, 1983), ch. 3; idem, "When is the Will Free?" *Philosophical Perspectives* 3 (1989): 399-422. See also James W. Lamb, "On a Proof of Incompatibilism," *Philosophical Review* 86 (January 1977): 20-35.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 32 (emphasis his).

¹⁶ William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 149.

¹⁷ See Mark Thomas Walker, "The Freedom of Judgment," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 11, no. 1 (2003): 63-92; William Hasker, *Metaphysics, Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 47-49.

¹⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 5, ch. 22: "Thus also the durations of wars are determined by Him as He may see meet according to His righteous will, and pleasure, and mercy, to afflict or to console the human race, so that they are sometimes of longer, sometimes of shorter duration." Paul Helm, a proponent of Augustinian providence, suggests the following outlook on evil [*The Providence of God, Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 231 (emphases mine)]:

Belief in providence enables Christians to put their pain in a different setting. How? By recognizing that *the evil they and others experience has been sent*. It is not the result of a free-action of human beings who are temporarily outside the sovereign control of God; it is not the result of a basic dualism between God and evil that afflicts the universe, as the Manichees and other dualists believed. *The evil that is being experienced is the result of the sovereign will of God.*

¹⁹ See Antony Flew, "Compatibilism, Free Will, and God," *Philosophy* 48 (1973): 231-44; J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), ch. 9.

²⁰ Baker boldly asserts, "Whether universalism is true or not, our salvation is in God's hands, period" (473).

²¹ 1 Timothy 2:4: "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

²² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 93, 2.