

“Theism, Atheism, and the Metaphysics of Free Will”¹
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ABSTRACT: Certain atheists and theists have alleged that their philosophical worldviews provide a better means for explaining a strong account of human freedom. Prominent atheists who claim that only atheism can give a reasonable account of freedom include Antony Flew and Jean-Paul Sartre. J. P. Moreland contends that only theism can account for free will. My thesis is that arguments for and against belief in God cannot be decided on the grounds of these types of free will arguments.

Does the existence of God aid or hinder the possibilities for one to maintain a robust sense of human freedom? Atheists, Antony Flew and Jean-Paul Sartre, allege that if God exists, genuine free will cannot. On the other hand, J. P. Moreland argues that atheism cannot account for free will because a cogent understanding of free will requires a theistic worldview. In this paper, I shall try to explain and critique the arguments presented by these three philosophers and present an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper. But first some definitions are in order.

What do I mean by human freedom? Although numerous qualifications and nuances could be given, for simplicity's sake I am going to work with three broad categories of human freedom. There are two incompatibilist views of freedom, libertarianism and determinism. “Libertarianism,” or “indeterminism,” is the view that there are some choices that humans perform without there being any sufficient conditions or causes that precede the act that is performed. “Determinism” is the view that maintains that sufficient causes exist prior to all choices such that it is impossible for an act not to occur. Finally, “compatibilism” or “soft-determinism” maintains that no logical inconsistency follows by affirming that humans are responsible for their choices and that all choices are sufficiently causally determined.

“Atheism” typically refers to the belief that God does not exist. In this paper, however, “atheism” may be construed more loosely to refer to the position that belief in God is not requisite for a robust view of free will. Thus, those who believe in God but do not think that their theistic belief is necessary to uphold a significant account of freedom qualify as atheists in this sense. The term “theist,” for the purposes of this paper, describes a person who believes in one, personal, transcendent being whose existence is required to uphold a cogent understanding of freedom.

Antony Flew

Antony Flew has argued in numerous places that belief in God constrains freedom.² Flew reasons that if God is absolutely sovereign, then our choices are analogous to those of a hypnotized person under the influence of a Great Hypnotist. He is particularly critical of the doctrine of predestination:

Predestination seems to make out that all of us, all the time, whether we know it or not, *both* when by ordinary standards we are acting freely and could help doing what we choose to do *and* when we are acting under compulsion or when we are not acting at all but are asleep or paralyzed – all of us are, really and ultimately, as it were, acting out the irresistible suggestions of the Great Hypnotist. This idea is incompatible with that of our being free agents, properly accountable for what we do.³

The problem is not just that humans would lose significant freedom, according to Flew, but that God would still hold humans to be morally accountable for their choices. In other words, if God is the determinate cause for all human choices, then it seems inconsistent for God to punish and reward them on the basis of choices God has determined them to perform. More pointedly, God’s ultimate judgment—heaven and hell—is supposed to be based on people’s choices in life. But if God has determined all human choices, particularly those that relate to this judgment, then heaven and hell

become the abhorrent result of the seemingly arbitrary will of God. Flew draws this conclusion when he writes, “Suppose now we learn that we are all, all the time, in all things, creatures of a Great Manipulator.” Flew continues, “[then] we can no longer take it for granted that it would be right to punish [us]; and certainly not that it would be right for [the] Creator to become the Great Justiciar!”⁴ Flew’s argument could be construed this way:

- (1) $\Theta \rightarrow P$
[If theism is true, then predestination is true.]
 - (2) $P \rightarrow \sim PAP$
[If predestination is true, then humans cannot act otherwise.]
 - (3) $\sim PAP \rightarrow \sim R$
[If humans cannot act otherwise, then they cannot be morally responsible.]
 - (4) $\Theta \rightarrow \sim R$ [1, 2, 3]
[If theism is true, then humans cannot be morally responsible.]
 - (5) $F \leftrightarrow R$
[Some action is freely performed if and only if one is morally responsible for that act.]
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- (6) $\Theta \rightarrow \sim F$ [4, 5]
[Therefore, if theism is true, then no action can be freely performed.]

As I understand Flew, there are at least two major problems in his argument.

First, he assumes that theism entails determinism (premise 1), which is contrary to what most theists think. Anticipating this critique, Flew explains that his argument encompasses the theological traditions represented by Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. Moreover, when Flew refers to the doctrine of predestination, he takes predestination to mean that God determines every act, to be “an immediate consequence of basic theism.”⁵ For the sake of argument, I will concede that Flew is correct in noting that the theology of Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards

entails theological determinism. Suppose he is right—what follows from that? This hardly merits the ironclad deduction that predestination (understood as theological determinism) is “an immediate consequence of basic theism.” For numerous influential and philosophically proficient theists such as Luis de Molina, Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, open theists, and many others harmonize the basic tenets of theism and libertarian free will.⁶ From this small sampling, it is evident that Flew’s assumption that theism entails determinism is mistaken. In light of this evidence, (2) will need to be restated as:

- (2') $P \rightarrow PAP$
 [If predestination is true, then humans can act otherwise.]

The second difficulty implicit in Flew’s argument is that he assumes that the ability to choose otherwise is both necessary and sufficient condition for moral responsibility. Until most recently this claim probably would go uncontested. Harry Frankfurt, however, has demonstrated that justifying this premise is problematic.⁷ To see this, take one of Frankfurt’s examples. Imagine that some person Jones has had a brain operation of which he is unaware. The brain surgeon places electrodes in Jones’s brain so he can control certain actions of Jones. Now suppose that the surgeon wants Jones to perform action *A*. If Jones chooses to do *A*, then the surgeon will not manipulate Jones’s actions in any way. If Jones chooses not to do *A*, however, then the surgeon will make Jones do *A* via his surgical modification on Jones. Furthermore, suppose Jones does in fact freely choose to do *A* without any manipulation from the surgeon. According to (3), Jones is not morally responsible since he could not act otherwise. Nonetheless, it seems that Jones’s action would count as a morally responsible act. So, something is wrong

with (3).⁸ If Frankfurt's counterexamples hold against the principle of alternate possibilities, then Flew's argument will have to modify (3) in the following way:

(3') $\sim\text{PAP} \rightarrow \text{R}$
 [If humans cannot act otherwise, then they can be morally responsible.]

Now when we take (1), (2'), and (3'), we get:

(4') $\Theta \rightarrow \text{R}$
 [If theism is true, then humans can be morally responsible.]

And (4') combined with (5) only yields

(6') $\Theta \rightarrow \text{F}$
 [If theism is true, then human acts can be freely performed.]

So, given (2') and (3'), Flew's argument cannot yield his intended conclusion.

For the sake of argument, however, assume that the modified premises (2') and (3') are not damning to Flew's argument. Has Flew provided a superior account of freedom by postulating atheism? As I see it, he has not. The crux of Flew's argument against theism is his disapproval of theological determinism, which typically is expressed by Christian philosophers and theologians as a type of soft-determinism.⁹ Flew's own view of freedom, however, is a materialistic compatibilism in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes and David Hume.¹⁰ Consequently, he finds the view that God determines all actions to be irreconcilable with moral responsibility. Yet, he sees no inconsistency with upholding moral responsibility when all actions are causally determined by material entities. In short, Flew is arguing that premise (3) (unrevised) is sufficient to reject theological compatibilism, while assuming (3) does not count against materialistic compatibilism. But Flew's substitution of materialistic compatibilism for theological compatibilism will not strike anyone as an improvement unless one has already vested interests in atheism. Moreover, anyone who finds any type of determinism or

compatibilism to be implausible will likely shy away from either of the options presented by theism and atheism given above.

J. P. Moreland

Against Flew, J. P. Moreland contends that any compatibilist type of atheism will not give an account of free will that is preferable to theism. Moreland assumes that compatibilist accounts of freedom are incoherent. Moreover, he suggests that many of the more defensible models of atheism are essentially tied to some form of compatibilism (as Flew contends), since they rely on something like metaphysical materialism to account for the entire makeup of human beings. If this is so, then Paul Churchland, an atheist and physical reductionist, is correct when he records that, “there is neither need, nor room, to fit any nonphysical substances or properties into our theoretical account of ourselves. We are creatures of matter.”¹¹ Based on this line of reasoning Moreland argues that theism can give a stronger account of freedom:

[Flew] desires to preserve libertarian freedom, but such freedom is actually more compatible with theism than with the more defensible versions of atheism – versions that are physicalistic or scientific in orientation. To see this, one must realize that the existence of full-blown freedom in certain creatures has metaphysical implications that are “danglers” for most versions of atheism. Freedom presupposes agent causation – agents that have the capacity to exercise their causal powers spontaneously for various reasons. But agent causation seems to presuppose dualism, and it is precisely the existence of finite, substantial souls or minds that is hard to explain if scientific/physicalistic versions of atheism are true.¹²

Moreland’s argument could be construed this way:

- (7) $L \rightarrow AC$
[If libertarianism is true, then agent causation is true.]
- (8) $AC \rightarrow D$
[If agent causation is true, then substance dualism is true.]

(9) $D \rightarrow \Theta$
 [If substance dualism is true, then theism is true.]

(10) $L \rightarrow \Theta$ [7, 8, 9]
 [Therefore, if libertarianism is true, then theism is true.]

Since theists can offer an adequate explanation for the origin of a self or agent, which seems to be implied for libertarian free will to exist, and atheists cannot, it follows that Moreland's argument shows that atheism cannot account for libertarian freedom as thoroughly as theism. Undoubtedly, atheists will question Moreland's appropriation of substance dualism,¹³ but his argument stands. In fact, it is likely that premises (7), (8), and (9) will all be disputed and will require rigorous support to accept.¹⁴ Unlike Flew's atheism, however, Moreland's theism does give a better account freedom than the view he is supplanting. If Moreland's contention—that theism accounts for libertarianism better than atheism—is correct, then theism will be preferable to those who find libertarianism to be true. Unfortunately for Moreland, this difference will likely only impress those who already have strong convictions for theism. For most people who are inclined to accept (7), (8), and (9) will likely already be theists.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Jean-Paul Sartre represents another important perspective of human freedom for atheism. Unlike Flew who is a compatibilist, Sartre is an indeterminist. Sartre represents a strand of atheism that is commonly referred to as existentialism. Existentialism is founded on the claim that existence precedes essence. In other words, existence precedes a knowable purpose, design, or end for what exists.

Freedom for Sartre is inherently tied to human existence. On his view, freedom is a basic component of being human. Sartre's position is forthrightly stated in *Being and Nothingness*:

My freedom is perpetually in question in my being; it is not a quality added on or a *property* of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being; and as in my being, my being is in question, I must necessarily possess a certain comprehension of freedom.¹⁵

One reason why Sartre opposes theism is that human freedom, on his view, is inconsistent with people having a designed end, purpose, or essence. In his own words, "The being which is what it is can not be free."¹⁶ In order to be truly free, Sartre contends that humans must be free to choose and fulfill their own purposes. He makes this point in *Existentialism and the Human Emotions*:

What is meant here by saying that existence precedes essence? It means that, first of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes himself.¹⁷

Sartre's argument can be construed in the following way:

- (11) $I \rightarrow \sim E$
 [If humans are indeterministically free, then humans cannot have a preexistent essence.]
- (12) $\Theta \rightarrow E$
 [If theism is true, then humans have a preexisting essence.]
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- (13) $\Theta \rightarrow \sim I$ [11, 12]
 [Therefore, if theism is true, then humans cannot be indeterministically free.]

The upshot of Sartre's atheism, unlike Flew's, is that it provides a stronger account of human freedom than any form of theism. In fact, human freedom according to

Sartre's existentialism will always be stronger than theistic accounts of freedom, which fundamentally describe humans as beings created with a preexisting purpose or essence.

Even Moreland's account of human freedom would be weaker than Sartre's.

Consequently, Sartre's atheism escapes the two faulty premises implicit in Flew's argument, while positing a seemingly better alternative to freedom than theism.

Some theists, however, have persuasively argued that an atheistic existentialist account of freedom fails to accomplish what it intends in the theist-atheist debate—namely to provide a more meaningful account of freedom. Humans can have a radical type of freedom to choose what they will on Sartre's view, but no choice is actually better than another. For Sartre, humans cannot and must not have an essential purpose to fulfill that is ontologically prior to existence. C. Stephen Evans explains the deficiencies of Sartre's philosophy in light of the theistic alternative:

God created humans to be responsible choosers. The choices are not indifferent; to choose to turn away from God and his ways is to choose not to become my true self. However, the fact that this true self is given, and not invented by me out of nothing, does not negate my freedom. It is, in fact, what makes my freedom *meaningful*. The freedom Sartre believes humans possess seems more arbitrary and meaningless. *There can be no concern for making good choices unless some choices are really good.*¹⁸

So, on Sartre's view, choosing is an end in itself. For theists, however, making choices is good, but those choices must be evaluated according to a higher standard, rather than merely valuing the act of choosing in itself. This gives grounds for rejecting

(11). In its place, Evans endorses:

(14) $E \rightarrow I$
 [If humans have a preexisting essence, then indeterministic freedom can be meaningful.]

Furthermore, Moreland's objection to Flew's atheism may still have some import for Sartre's version. Sartre contends that absolute freedom is a basic fact of humanity that is inexplicable. Consequently, on Sartre's view, human freedom is a brute fact that mysteriously exists without explanation. Theism, as Moreland argues, can give an explanation of freedom by maintaining that God created humans with an immaterial self for the purpose of bestowing them with free will. Sartre's atheism cannot explain this peculiar phenomenon about human beings. If Sartre is right, how humans possess freedom remains unexplained.

So, Sartre's atheism may provide a philosophy that advocates humans have unfettered freedom, but I have maintained that there are at least two difficulties with his view of freedom. First, free will without essential purpose or meaning for choices does not give a more meaningful account of libertarian freedom. Second, how humans have free will remains inscrutable. Therefore, Sartre's atheism will not persuade anyone who is not already committed to some form of existentialism or atheism.

Conclusion

This paper began with the following question: Does the existence of God aid or hinder the possibilities for one to maintain a robust sense of human freedom? I believe have reached some preliminary answers to this question. First, belief in God clearly does aid one in understanding a strong account of freedom. As Moreland showed, theists can give an account for the existence of free will. Second, following Stephen Evans theists can argue that belief in God allows for a meaningful framework in which free choices occur. For these reasons, it seems that belief in God supports belief in human freedom, contrary to the claims of Flew and Sartre.

Yet theists should not think they have surmounted a decisive victory over atheists in the metaphysics of free will. For it seems that these theists have only shown that theism is compatible with a strong account of freedom. What has *not* been demonstrated is that atheism is not compatible with a robust account of free will. For theists who are willing to concede compatibilism in order to accept views like Thomism, Calvinism, and other forms of theological determinism, must recognize that an atheistic account of freedom, like Antony Flew's compatibilism, is just as rational as their own. Moreover, atheists who are inclined to uphold libertarian freedom can consistently endorse views like Sartre's that believe that human free will is an inexplicable brute fact of human existence. Moreover, theists have difficult problems of their own to face if free will exists as they claim. For those like Moreland, the classic problems of substance dualism and agent causation will need to be addressed. For all theists, the question of why God has given freedom to his creation knowing that they would (or could) misuse it terribly, is begging to be answered. It may be the case that these types of objections stand as rational grounds for atheists to discard theories of freedom available to theists.

So the metaphysics of free will is not going to be an issue that theists or atheists will be able to use to decide the truth and falsity of theism and atheism. While it may be conceded that theism gives a meaningful account of freedom, atheists are not obligated to abandon atheism for this reason alone. After all, simply because a possible state of affairs could make freedom explicable does not necessarily make such states of affairs true. Therefore, the arguments for and against belief in God must be decided elsewhere.

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² Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1966), 44-57; idem, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," in *Critiques of God*, ed. Peter Angeles (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1976), 227-37; idem, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1976); idem, "The Case for God Challenged," in *Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists and Atheists* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 171-74.

³ Antony Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," 234 (his emphasis).

⁴ Antony Flew, *Presumption of Atheism*, 96.

⁵ Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 45.

⁶ A quick survey of contemporary literature on this subject shows that numerous mainstream theists hold that libertarian free will is compatible with the basic claims of theism. For example, see David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986); Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2000); James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, ed., *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2001).

⁷ See Harry Frankfurt, "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 829-39; idem, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20.

⁸ Some theists try to exploit Frankfurt-style examples to defend freedom and divine providence. For example, see Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 154-62; John Martin Fischer, "Freedom and Foreknowledge," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 67-79.

⁹ For example, Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 86-89.

¹⁰ Flew, "Divine Omnipotence and Human Freedom," 229-33.

¹¹ Paul Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 21.

¹² J. P. Moreland, "Atheism and Leaky Buckets," in *Does God Exist?*, 237-38.

¹³ Of course, not all theists are substance dualists. See the variety of opinions found in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Maloney, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

¹⁴ Moreland argues for these claims in other writings. For example, see J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), chs. 4-5; J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), chs. 11-13.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 439 (his emphasis).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 440.

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and the Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1957), 15.

¹⁸ C. Stephen Evans, *Søren Kierkegaard's Christian Psychology* (Vancouver: Regent, 1990), 55 (my emphases).