

A response to Kevin Timpe's objections

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In the pages of the journal *Faith & Philosophy*,¹ Kevin Timpe has offered a critical review of my book *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil*.² Timpe is an expert on the topics I cover in my book, and an excellent philosopher whose work on free will I greatly enjoyed personally. I highly recommend his *Free Will: Sourcehood and its Alternatives*, as well as *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*, both very helpful. Therefore, I was honored to read him say even *some* nice things about my book. But let's not focus on them here—the praise is not usually the reason a philosopher thinks it helpful to respond to a review of his book. Let's rather consider his objections, which are many. After all, Timpe is a convinced libertarian about free will, which puts us on opposing teams when I defend Calvinism. And opposing me he does! His review is not pulling punches, so let me discuss whether these punches actually land.

ON DEFINITIONS

Timpe first finds issue with some of my definitions. The aim of my book is to defend the coherence of a Calvinist view of providence and free will, in the face of two families of objections: 1. those that claim that Calvinism is incompatible with human moral responsibility (“Excusing Sinners”), and 2. those that claim that Calvinism involves God inappropriately in evil (“Blaming God”). These objections, I state in the book, come against “Calvinist determinism,” a phrase I took from Johnson and Alexander in their volume *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*.³ Timpe quotes my definition of “Calvinist determinism” as the thesis that:

“everything that comes to pass is determined, or necessitated by prior conditions, . . . [specifically,]

¹ *Faith and Philosophy* Vol. 35 No. 3 July 2018, pp. 373-379.

² Guillaume Bignon, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

³ David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson, “Introduction.” in David E. Alexander and Daniel M. Johnson, eds., *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016), 1-18.

God's providential de[c]ree and the full scope of his supernatural activity, whatever shape one thinks that may take"⁴

Timpe offers multiple objections against this definition:

First, this definition of Calvinism is compatible with the truth of various forms of universalism, including what I've referred to elsewhere as "necessary universalism," which "claims that it is a necessary truth that none are eternally damned" ... Allowing such a view to count as Calvinism is strange, particularly given Bignon's reliance on the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Second, there are theologians who self-identify as Calvinists but who wouldn't satisfy Bignon's definition (e.g., Oliver Crisp, whom Bignon mentions in n. 14 (7), as well as the historical figures discussed in *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology*...

Finally, Calvinist determinism so defined doesn't entail theological compatibilism (that is, the view that human moral responsibility is compatible with the truth of theological determinism). And it's clear from the book as a whole that Bignon's Calvinism is intended to include both theological compatibilism and theological determinism.⁵

Timpe misunderstands my project here. With my definition, I am not trying to provide necessary and sufficient conditions to call someone a Calvinist. That is notoriously difficult to do to everyone's satisfaction, because the word is used rather differently in various contexts. But my usage *in the context of discussions on free will* is quite reasonable: the determinist view is commonly called "Calvinism" because it is clearly that of John Calvin, and the objections I survey in my book are aimed at Calvinism *in virtue of* its commitment to determinism, or what I called "Calvinist determinism." Now, if a determinist also believes in universalism, is he still a *real* "Calvinist"? No, not really. But he does have a "Calvinist view" of human free will and divine providence. Certainly, there are all sorts of "un-Calvinist" things that a theological determinist can affirm, at which historical and doctrinal heirs of John Calvin would be appalled: incompatibilism (like Derk Pereboom does), universalism (like Lynne Baker does), or even credo-baptism (like I do!). Still, it's perfectly reasonable to refer to theological determinism as "the Calvinist view." When Thomas Flint contrasts what he sees as the two main accounts of free will and divine providence,⁶ he calls them "Thomism" and "Molinism." When he does that, I understand that the "Thomist" view is mine, and I don't take him to be calling me a Roman Catholic. His definition is fine in his Catholic context, and my usage of "Calvinism" is similar in my protestant context.

⁴ Timpe, 373.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 373-374.

⁶ Thomas P. Flint, "Two Accounts of Providence" in Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine & Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 147-81.

Timpe finally offers a similar criticism about my use of “Arminianism,” this time in the conclusion of his review:

At times, Bignon’s definitions and treatment of historical issues are perplexing, especially if he intends theologians and not just philosophers to be among his audience. As an instance here, see the claim that “all theologians who affirm libertarian free will” are “Arminians” (10). I suspect Anselm, for instance, would be surprised to learn that he is an Arminian.⁷

Here again, I don't mean to suggest the label of “Arminian” fits like a glove on every libertarian that ever was. Rather, I use it as shorthand for the philosophical view of libertarianism. I don't claim Anselm (or say Ignatius of Loyola!) was an Arminian. But they held to *an Arminian view* of free will.⁸ And finally, I did acknowledge in my book the historical incongruity of labels like “Calvinism,” when I explained:

the term “Calvinist” could even theoretically be employed meaningfully in superficially anachronistic sentences such as “Saint Augustine was a Calvinist.” This isn’t affirming the absurdity that Augustine had read John Calvin, but rather that he espoused broadly the same view of divine providence, referred to in this work as “Calvinism.”⁹

Now, Timpe may object: if what I have in view is really just libertarianism and determinism/compatibilism, why not stick to these rigorous philosophical labels and stay away from the theological/historical names? Precisely *because* I want theologians to “be among [my] audience” and join the debate. I want them to understand they're engaging in philosophy! I want them to realize the traditional Calvinist/Arminian debates amount to debates on philosophical positions about free will, and theologians better familiarize themselves with the views and engage with the arguments of the philosophers. More of that would be great, and Timpe should (and probably does) value this prospect.

In any case, Timpe’s criticism of my definitions doesn’t prevent his thoughtful engagement with my arguments, since we agree on the key philosophical views, even if he disagrees on how we should call them.

⁷ Timpe, 379.

⁸ Although Anselm may happen to be a bad example, because not everyone sees him as a libertarian. I personally don’t enter that debate, but Paul Helm seems to count him in his compatibilist/Augustinian camp in Paul Helm, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God” in Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 5-52.

⁹ Bignon, 7.

ON ENGAGING WITH VERY BAD ARGUMENTS

Timpe then criticizes my book for arguing against some arguments that are so bad they don't deserve a response:

Some of the versions of the "excusing sinners" argument are such that I've not seen them suggested in the literature, e.g.: "puppets are determined; puppets are not morally responsible; humans are determined; therefore humans are not morally responsible" (17). It's perplexing to me that Bignon would think he needs to argue against arguments of this sort.¹⁰

And again, in the conclusion of the review:

But at other times it [the book] considers versions of arguments or claims that one simply doesn't—and shouldn't—find in the philosophical literature. Here see, for instance, the discussion of whether determinism necessarily entails manipulation in chapter 3 or the discussion in chapter 4 of whether determinism entails mental illness.¹¹

So, what am I doing here? It's quite simple. The first 4 chapters of my book deal with several parallel claims made against Calvinist determinism, which go like this: "determinism excludes moral responsibility, because being determined is *a little bit like* something else that we should agree excludes moral responsibility." And that "something else" is alternatively taken to be:

1. "being a pet or a puppet," 2. "being coerced," 3. "being manipulated," or 4. "being mentally ill," all of which I grant can exclude moral responsibility (given the proper caveats in each case). These *types* of claims are made in the literature by very respectable philosophers: the pets argument by Hugh McCann, manipulation arguments by Derk Pereboom or Al Mele, and the mental illness argument by William Rowe. When *these* philosophers make those claims, they tend to be rigorously stated, but in the literature, the same family of claims is made by theologians (even respected ones¹²), who often gesture toward the objections, but leave them wholly underdeveloped. When they do, it's hard to see exactly what argument they should be understood to be making. So, in each case, I proposed to do the work myself, of reconstructing what the objection *may* be, before refuting it in various forms. Are some of these forms very bad? Well yes, I find it helpful to start with naïve reconstructions that are obviously poor ways of framing the argument, to get them out of the way before treating serious candidates. But then it's not as if I spent pages refuting a version that obviously commits the fallacy of affirming the consequent. I only briefly mentioned it to dismiss it and move on to the better candidates. So, when Timpe lists only my very

¹⁰ Timpe, 374.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 379.

¹² Take Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, and Roger Olson, to name only three.

first fallacious reconstruction (of the pets and puppets argument) and doesn't mention how little time I actually spend on it (I literally devote 3 sentences to it), he's not representing my work fairly. I don't feel the "need to argue with" it; I barely mention it in passing, before refining the argument and refuting it in its strongest form in the multiple pages that follow. Its strongest form is that of an argument by analogy, making either the milder claim that there exists a relevant similarity, or the bolder claim that there exists no relevant difference, between determined choices and the choices of pets. Since I *also* and *mostly* treat these sophisticated versions, I can't be accused of fighting dumb straw men to avoid the real opposition.¹³

ON THE COERCION ARGUMENT

Timpe then starts to engage with my responses to some of these arguments, starting with the coercion argument. He quotes one of my reconstructions as follows:

12. If determinism is true, then all human choices are coerced.

13. If a person's choice is coerced, then that person cannot be morally responsible for it.

Therefore,

14. If determinism is true, then no person can be morally responsible for any of his choices.

Which is to say

6. Determinism is incompatible with moral responsibility. (21)¹⁴

And then he responds to my refutation like this:

Bignon points out that the Calvinist must reject premise 12, since "true coercion excludes moral responsibility; there is no use contesting this point" (23). According to Bignon, we ought to reject premise 12 since "on theistic compatibilism, in usual cases of human free choices, God does not determine the actions of humans against their wills, but through their wills" (23). Note, however, that there are cases of coercion that go through an individual's will but still plausibly provide a moral excuse (e.g., "give me your wallet or I'll shoot"). So the mere inclusion of the human agent's will as an instrumental cause of the action doesn't entail that the agent whose will is involved is responsible.¹⁵

This misses my response to the coercion argument altogether. To lay it down most clearly, let's come back to the coercion argument in its strongest form. The version Timpe quotes above (a claim of direct entailment from determinism to coercion) is actually not the strongest version of the argument. The coercion argument is best stated instead as an argument by analogy, or the claim that there exists no relevant difference between a human choice that is coerced, and a human choice

¹³ This is not an accusation that Timpe himself makes, but I preemptively respond here as it may naturally come up in the mind of one who reads Timpe's objection.

¹⁴ Timpe, 374.

¹⁵ Ibid.

that is determined by God. To refute that claim in my book, I offer one such property of coercion that is sufficient to exclude moral responsibility, and yet is absent from normal cases of human free choices determined by a Calvinist God. That property, I suggested, is “the use of force or threats.” *That* is the heart of my response to the coercion argument. And that sentence of mine, which Timpe quoted above, must be read in that context. The use of threats like Timpe’s “give me your wallet or I’ll shoot” counts as going “against the will” as I intended the phrase in that one sentence. And I don’t think the misunderstanding is my fault, because that sentence of mine he quotes, is extracted from a paragraph that twice—once right before the sentence and once right after—explains that the use of force *or threats* is what I take to be the relevant difference between coercion and determined free choices. Here are the two sentences preceding the quote:

On the theistic compatibilist account, all human choices are determined by God’s providential decree, but on the pain of begging the question, incompatibilists cannot assume that the only way to operate such an efficacious decree is to use force or threats. Neither of these need be involved in the compatibilist story of how God providentially determines the outcomes of human choices, or at any rate, such coercion need not be involved in all determinist human choices—contrary to what the incompatibilist objector would have to assume in premise (12).¹⁶

Then comes my sentence about God not going “against the will,” and here are the two sentences that immediately follow it:

God usually employs neither threats nor physical force, but rather, he providentially influences human hearts to willingly accomplish his purposes in all things. Of course, incompatibilists very well may disagree with this story, but it coherently excludes divine coercion for human choices freely made in the compatibilist sense.¹⁷

So, I don’t see that my response to the coercion argument is touched by Timpe objecting to the phrase “through the will.” My two-pronged refutation of the coercion argument by analogy stands: 1. the claim that there is no relevant difference between human coercion and divinely determined choices will remain question-begging until we’re told what exactly is the relevant similarity between these two, and 2. my suggested relevant difference does more than call out this question-begging premise, it refutes it by showing there *is* a relevant difference: a feature of coercion (the use of force or threats) that excludes moral responsibility, and is absent from the normal cases of divinely determined free choices.

¹⁶ Bignon, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

ON THE MANIPULATION ARGUMENT

The manipulation argument has the same structure. In its most sophisticated form, it is a claim that there exists no relevant difference between a choice that is manipulated (say by a mad scientist using brain electrodes), and a choice that is determined by God on Calvinism. The argument has the same structure *and* the same failure: it first begs the question, because we are not given any relevant similarity between human manipulation (which I grant excludes moral responsibility in sufficiently specified cases), and divinely determined choices, some of which I maintain are responsible. We are just *told* that there is no relevant difference, but that premise isn't established. Accordingly, the compatibilist need not even take the bait when the libertarian dares him: "tell me what's the relevant difference between human manipulation and divine determinism." It's not his job. But as a matter of fact, I *do* take the bait, because I think I can, and it looks delicious: I want to go beyond mere accusations of question-begging, and *refute* the claim that there is no relevant difference. So, in my book, I suggest the following difference, which Timpe quotes:

for a choice to be free such that its maker is morally responsible, it need not be undetermined, but it does need to be determined (assuming determinism is true) by the agent's own desires, which flow from the agent's God-given character and inclinations¹⁸

I think something like that successfully differentiates between the mad scientist who manipulates my brain thereby overriding my God-given character and desire, and the scenario where I do the same action on my own God-given character and desire. Killing my wife as a result of the mad scientist's brain manipulation is not morally responsible because my God-given character and desires are messed with by a human manipulator, whereas my loving her is responsible, even if my desire to love her is determined by a Calvinist God who, as my proper creator, has shaped my heart and inclined me to love her.

Timpe objects:

However, notice that if theological determinism is true, all cases of manipulation are ultimately God-given. What one would want, and what one doesn't find, is an account of why responsibility despite God-giveness is compatible with God's directly causing an agent to choose, but incompatible with the God-giveness that goes through any human agent (that is, a manipulator).¹⁹

Here again, his objection hinges on his different interpretation of my phrase "God-given." He uses it with a meaning such that everything is God-given on determinism, which makes it unable to

¹⁸ Timpe, 374.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 375.

differentiate between cases that are responsible and cases that aren't. But *I* didn't mean the phrase like that. Is everything God-given on determinism? Well, yes, in *some* sense of God-given-ness. But obviously not the sense I was suggesting. Mine doesn't have to do with merely tracing the action causally back to God; that of course is the case for all actions on Calvinist determinism. Rather, it had to do with *how* the determined action comes to pass. I suggested that God as our creator has a proper channel to work directly in our hearts to appropriately determine us to act responsibly, whereas responsibility is excluded if our (equally determined) choice is brought about indirectly, going through a human overriding of our "God-given" character and desires, by a human manipulator. Here is what I had to say in the book to further describe the distinction:

For example, when I chose to propose to my wife, the choice flowed out of my own character and desires, all of which I as a Calvinist still assert were providentially (and romantically!) predestined by my maker—in that sense, she truly was my destiny (and irresistible). On the other hand, when one engages in acts of manipulation (whether overriding or influencing at sufficient strength if there is such a thing), he "meddles" with another agent's God-given desires. He brings about a choice that is not made on the basis of this person's God-given character and desires, but instead desires that were humanly manufactured (either directly or indirectly), and for which the agent cannot be held morally responsible.²⁰

I think something like that is the relevant difference. I think there exists *some* sense of God-given-ness one can affirm about a person's naturally obtained character and desires, which may not be affirmed of a mad scientist controlling that person with electrodes, albeit providentially determined by a Calvinist God. My book stops short of a philosophical analysis of that "God-given-ness" in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (Calvinist philosophers can pick up where I left off), but *that* sort of God-given-ness is what I suggest as a relevant difference. In response, it's insufficient to identify some (other) sense of the phrase which doesn't do the job; the incompatibilist advocate of the manipulation argument must convince me that *no* meaning of my phrase does what I want it to do. That isn't likely to be done.

So, the incompatibilist is free to find my suggested criterion insufficient, and maintain that we *are not* morally responsible if determined, even when making choices on the basis of our God-given characters and desires, but the coherence of my distinction remains, and it successfully refutes the manipulation argument by analogy. The "God-given-ness" criterion, as *I* understand it, is not satisfied by manipulation cases, is sufficient to exclude moral responsibility in those cases, and it is satisfied by normal cases of divinely determined free choices. In any case, as I mentioned, the

²⁰ Bignon, 37.

burden of proof isn't on my shoulders, and even if my criterion failed, the incompatibilist argument from manipulation, short of being rebutted, would remain question-begging.

Timpe doesn't object further to my first 4 chapters on arguments by analogy, and moves on to chapters 5 and 6, which he says are stronger, and more careful. I don't think there was anything weak and careless about the previous chapters, but chapter 5 is an important piece of my defense indeed. It begins with a discussion and refutation of Peter van Inwagen's "Consequence Argument."

ON THE CONSEQUENCE ARGUMENT AND MISUNDERSTANDING VAN INWAGEN

Here, Timpe accuses me of being careless in my reading of van Inwagen:

Bignon often doesn't exercise proper caution in understanding van Inwagen, as when he thinks that "having a choice about whether p is true" can only be understood as involving libertarianism [...] or when Bignon suggests that what van Inwagen "has in view is libertarian free will" (63), a phrase that van Inwagen abhors²¹

But van Inwagen's feelings about the phrase are irrelevant; I don't say he loves it or even uses it. Whether or not he uses the *phrase*, I insist that the libertarian *view* of free will (i.e. an ability to make free choices whose outcome is not determined by preceding factors) *is* the one that his argument presupposes rather than proves. Maybe van Inwagen accepts that the phrase "free will" can be read as not involving libertarianism, but *in the consequence argument*, it is supposed to involve the categorical ability to do otherwise, and hence *must* be read as involving libertarianism. Admittedly, doing so will end up begging the question, but *not doing so* makes the Consequence Argument a non-sequitur as an argument for incompatibilism, because it stops short of telling us why determinism is incompatible with "free will" unqualified. As I write in the book,

If the sense of "choice" and "free will" that is employed in all three of the consequence argument's formulations is no longer supposed to be libertarian, then none of their negative conclusions follows from the mere truth of determinism. In the first argument, only a libertarian free will features an ability to do otherwise holding the past and the laws of nature in place. In the second argument, only a libertarian free will permits access to alternate possible worlds. And in the third argument, only a libertarian free will secures the truth of α , β , (4), and (6).²²

So, I don't think there is any faux pas in my treatment of van Inwagen's consequence argument, and my critique stands against Timpe's objections.

²¹ Timpe, 375.

²² Bignon, 67.

ON THE CONDITIONAL ABILITY TO DO OTHERWISE

In the rest of chapter 5, I discuss the infamous “principle of alternate possibilities” (PAP), or the question of whether moral responsibility requires the “ability to do otherwise.” My main point there, is that incompatibilists who press this claim against compatibilism fail to distinguish between the *categorical* ability to do otherwise while holding everything in place, and the *conditional* ability to do otherwise *if one wanted to do otherwise*, which compatibilists do grant is necessary for moral responsibility. Drawing this distinction is a fairly common move by compatibilists. But of course, incompatibilists have a lot of bad things to say against the conditional analysis of ability. So, I tackle this criticism in that chapter. I tackle Austin’s “golfer” case and its claim that the conditional analysis of ability is not necessary for all language of ability: it’s true and irrelevant. I tackle Lehrer’s “red candy” case and its claim that a conditional analysis of ability is not sufficient for all language of ability: it’s true and irrelevant. And finally, I tackle the claim that a conditional analysis of ability is not sufficient for moral responsibility: it’s true and irrelevant, since the principle of alternate possibilities is voicing a *necessary* condition for moral responsibility, not a *sufficient* one.

Timpe seems to grant me all of this, but asks for more:

While this is true, without knowing the other conditions on moral responsibility, it’s hard to evaluate whether his defense of the conditional analysis is ultimately successful.²³

I don’t know what counts as “ultimately successful,” but my defense of the conditional analysis *is* successful: I show that no argument on offer in the literature refutes it. That’s pretty good. What Timpe additionally asks of me is a fully specified list of criteria which together constitute a sufficient condition for moral responsibility. I agree it would be sweet if I had that too, but it’s not part of my project in *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God*. It’s very difficult to specify, and as I mention in the book, I’m not sure libertarians are in a better position to do that either (I reference Robert Kane’s proposal, which ends up being remarkably complex too).²⁴

Timpe ends this section on a very positive note:

Nevertheless, chapter 5’s discussion of conditional analyses and classical compatibilism is one of the most interesting I’ve seen in recent literature.²⁵

²³ Timpe, 376.

²⁴ Bignon, 162-163.

²⁵ Timpe, 376.

It's hard to make a "thank you" not sound sarcastic in the middle of a critical response, but I do mean it with no sarcasm whatsoever: thank you for the kind words, I'm glad this section was so well received.

ON POSITIVE ARGUMENTS TO GO BEYOND MERE SKEPTICISM

I then offer two positive arguments to think that the incompatibilist version of the principle of alternate possibilities, more than unproven, is actually false. They're my versions of Jonathan Edwards' claim that God is praiseworthy for acting righteously even though he is unable to act unrighteously, and of Martin Luther's claim that fallen men afflicted by original sin are blameworthy for failing to live a sinless life, even though they're unable to live a sinless life. I reformulate these two arguments rigorously and defend them against the best rejoinders. Timpe thinks they don't work: "It's not clear to me that these arguments are especially problematic for the libertarian."²⁶ So, let's review where he thinks they fail.

ON PRAISEWORTHINESS AND IMPECCABILITY

With respect to God, and the claim that he is praiseworthy for acting righteously even though he's unable to act unrighteously, Timpe first responds like this:

The libertarian could hold, for instance, that God's moral perfection is compatible both with his decision to create and not to create, and thus there are at least some categorical abilities that even God has.²⁷

Yes. An indeterminist about God's will can certainly claim that "there are at least some categorical abilities that even God has." But that is not relevant to my argument. I claim that there are *some* things for which God is morally praiseworthy without the categorical ability to do otherwise than *those*. I don't claim in this argument that *all* things God does are like that. So, the existence of some things that aren't like that, does nothing to negate the existence of some that are.

Timpe then offers this response:

God's impeccability, the impossibility "for God to do anything but that which is righteous" (105), doesn't rule out that God has the ability to do otherwise.²⁸

Right. It doesn't immediately rule out the ability to do otherwise *tout court*. It does rule out the ability to do otherwise *than acting righteously*. And since he is praiseworthy *for acting righteously*,

²⁶ Timpe, 376.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

we're holding at least one "thing" (acting righteously) for which God is responsible, and other than which he does not have the categorical ability to do. That's all my argument needs in order to refute the PAP. Timpe seems to base his dissent on a distinction that can be drawn among the "things" we can be said to be responsible for. These "things" may be: 1. fully specified single actions, or 2. more general classes of actions, described at a higher level of granularity. This is the distinction between what Peter van Inwagen calls "events particulars," and "events universals." A fully specified action like "falsely telling God that you shared all the proceeds from the sale of your field" is called an "event particular." But that same action can also be described at a higher level of granularity as follows: "lying to God," which would be an "event universal." This is a coherent distinction. And my book's claim about such "levels of granularity" is straightforward: I say that the principle of alternate possibilities, if true, must apply at all levels of granularity, as long as we remain consistent in the level at which we're describing actions.²⁹ If "moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise" in general, then it's true, more specifically, of event particulars (so that "falsely telling God that you shared all the proceeds from the sale of your field" is blameworthy only if you have the ability to avoid "falsely telling God that you shared all the proceeds from the sale of your field"), and it's true of event universals (so that "lying to God" is blameworthy only if you have the ability to avoid "lying to God"). Peter van Inwagen agrees, as he affirms the PAP as applied to both universals and particulars.³⁰

Timpe's response to my argument makes it clear that this is the distinction he's trying to exploit. He writes:

Bignon thinks that divine freedom shows the ability to do otherwise isn't required for moral responsibility:

31. God always chooses and acts righteously, and lacks the categorical ability to do otherwise than acting righteously.

32. God is always morally praiseworthy, that is, he is morally responsible, for his righteous choices and actions.

Therefore

33. Moral responsibility does not require the ability to do otherwise.

Notice, however, that this argument is invalid as it stands. For the argument to be valid, the conclusion needs to be replaced with:

33*. Moral responsibility does not require the ability to do other than to act righteously.

²⁹ Bignon, 114-116.

³⁰ Ibid., 116.

And there are incompatibilist views of freedom (both human and divine) that are compatible with 33*, despite Bignon's argument against "levels of granularity for actions" (110–116). So I don't see that this argument need worry the incompatibilist.³¹

But I don't argue "against levels of granularity for actions." As I explained above, I argue that the PAP must be applied at constant levels of granularity for action, and that if PAP is true at one level, it must be true at all levels. Timpe's objection flows from his misinterpretation of the phrase "doing otherwise" in my proposition (33). In context, it meant doing otherwise *than the "thing" for which one is responsible*. And by "thing," here, is meant any event, universal or particular. Proposition (33) thus claimed that moral responsibility for an event (universal) does not require the ability to do otherwise *than that same event (universal)*. And that does follow from (31) and (32), which provided a successful counterexample at the level of event universals. There is an event universal, "acting righteously," for which God is responsible even though he doesn't have the categorical ability to do otherwise *than that same event universal*, "acting righteously." With that proper interpretation of (33), my argument remains valid. And once the PAP is shown false like that at the level of event universals, one must deny it at the level of event particulars as well, or be exposed to the charge of special pleading. It would be inconsistent to maintain that the PAP happens to be true at the lowest level of granularity, but somehow becomes false when applied to every higher level. There is nothing special about the lowest level of granularity for action that makes the PAP true there, while it's false at every other level of description for actions. Therefore, my argument stands and shows the PAP is false, whichever level of granularity we use in it to describe the action.

ON INCONSISTENT LEVELS OF GRANULARITY

One last option needs to be addressed, as there remains one plausible reading of Timpe's response. Perhaps Timpe aimed to defend a PAP with inconsistent levels of granularity: one that speaks of event universals in its consideration of moral responsibility, but speaks only of event particulars in its demand for alternate possibilities. It would be the claim that one can be responsible for an event universal even if he could not "do otherwise" in the sense of "avoiding that event universal," as long as he could "do otherwise" in the sense of "bringing about a different event particular," albeit one that still counts as the same event universal. Applied to God, it would be something like

³¹ Timpe, 376-377.

this: God is doing the event universal of “acting righteously,” and remains praiseworthy for it even though he cannot avoid the event universal of “acting righteously,” as long as he can perform a different action, bringing about a different event particular, albeit one that is still righteous, one that still counts as the same event universal: “acting righteously.” This is a plausible reconstruction of Timpe’s objection, because with that reading of “doing otherwise” in proposition (33), it no longer follows from (31) and (32), as he alleged. I repeat it wasn’t what *I* meant in (33), but that different version of the PAP is no longer refuted by God’s praiseworthiness and impeccability indeed.

So, how would one block that escape route? By insisting that it’s not how the PAP works. Merely avoiding the particulars is irrelevant to one’s moral responsibility for an event universal. If moral responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise, that “otherwise” needs to be an alternative that is morally significant *to the event under consideration*. It must be a morally different alternative, with less praise or blame than in the actual scenario. There needs to be a moral contrast between what the person does and what is claimed the person could have done instead. Consider an example I mentioned in the book: God’s promise to Abraham to give him a son.³² Was God praiseworthy for keeping his promise and giving Abraham a son? Yes. Could an impeccable God have failed to keep his promise? No. Yet the PAP would entail that God couldn’t be praised if he couldn’t have avoided the keeping of his promise, which gives us a successful *reductio* against the PAP. But we see here that it won’t work to reply “but God could have ‘done otherwise,’ he could have given Abraham a red-haired son instead of a black-haired son.” That ability would be irrelevant to his praiseworthiness for “giving him a son.” What would matter is whether he could refrain from giving him a son altogether. Otherwise, morally insignificant alternatives come cheap. As a matter of fact, one can virtually *always* find multiple event particulars within any event which one held to be particular, but which as a result turns out to be universal. Take the example I gave above for an alleged event particular: suppose that I “falsely told God that I shared all the proceeds from the sale of my field.” There are actually all sorts of different, morally irrelevant ways I could have done that. I could have raised my lip an extra millimeter, while telling the same lie; I could have spoken just a decibel louder, while telling the same lie; I could have pronounced the sentence faster by a millisecond, while telling the same lie. But these abilities to “do otherwise,” these abilities to bring about a different event particular, are irrelevant. What we would need is the ability to bring

³² Bignon, 119.

about a scenario that is better because it avoids the event universal altogether: a scenario in which there is less blame than the way things actually went down, because it avoids the blameworthy event universal we're talking about.³³

A final example will cement the point, this time with a conditional analysis of ability. Suppose I wake up in the middle of the night with food poisoning. I don't have time to leave the bed, and I throw up on the sheet. The only available alternative was to hit the blanket instead of the sheet, and these two scenarios are equal in terms of laundry pain. So, can I be blamed for the event universal of throwing up on the bed? No. I couldn't have avoided it, even if I had wanted to.³⁴ If my wife happened to be the one doing laundry that day and blamed me, I would tell her I'm sorry I hit the bed, but I couldn't do otherwise. I don't suppose she'd insist: "you could have done otherwise! You could have hit the blanket instead of the sheet." The suggested alternative isn't better, so it's morally irrelevant here. I could only be blamed if I could *also* have reached the bathroom, and freely chose to hit the sheet instead. Provided I couldn't, I shouldn't be held responsible. We see that the ability to bring about a different event particular that counts as the same event universal is irrelevant to whether one is morally responsible for the event universal, and hence maintaining a PAP with inconsistent levels of granularity is not a successful escape for the libertarian.

ON SOURCE INCOMPATIBILISM AND THE CHARGE OF COMPATIBILISM

At this point, one may wonder why Timpe tried to defend the PAP (with consistent or inconsistent levels of granularity), since Timpe is one of the most important advocates of so-called "source incompatibilism," as opposed to "leeway incompatibilism." And isn't the move to source incompatibilism motivated by a desire to maintain incompatibilism about created humans in spite of the *falsity* of the PAP? Yes and no. In the most generic terms, *source incompatibilism* is just the claim that the sourcehood condition, that of "being the ultimate source of one's action," is necessary for moral responsibility, and is the *most fundamental* aspect of a free action. But not all source incompatibilists agree on whether moral responsibility *also* entails the existence of alternate

³³ That is why I think the "flickers of freedom" response to Frankfurt-style cases is actually successful (and hence why I don't think Frankfurt-style cases work to establish compatibilism). In the alternate scenario of Frankfurt's example, Smith doesn't avoid the killing, but he does avoid the blame. That is clearly morally significant. It's a very relevant moral contrast indeed.

³⁴ Yes, I too affirm this much, based on the compatibilist-friendly version of the PAP, which features a conditional ability to do otherwise, and which I called PAP_{If} in the book.

possibilities. Those who deny it, Timpe calls “narrow source incompatibilists,” but he personally counts himself in the camp of “wide source incompatibilists,” those who affirm that while sourcehood is the most fundamental condition for moral responsibility, *it also entails the existence of alternate possibilities*. So Timpe’s wide source incompatibilism does entail the PAP, and our refutation of the PAP tackles his view by *modus tollens*. But let me say a word about the “narrow” version of source incompatibilism. Its proponents claim that moral responsibility *doesn’t* require the ability to do otherwise, but that it requires that the choice not be determined *by a source that extends outside the acting agent*. Why have some incompatibilists (like W. Paul Franks or William Lane Craig) made this move? The praiseworthiness of an impeccable God is one important reason why. They wish to maintain that God can be praiseworthy for acting righteously even while he cannot do otherwise than acting righteously. God remains praiseworthy, they say, because his inability isn’t born out of an *outside* determination of his character, but an *inner* determination of his necessary, self-existent nature. That’s fine as a distinction, but then as I say in my book, it *grants* that the PAP is false, and since I go on to argue that incompatibilism entails the PAP,³⁵ it follows by *modus tollens* that incompatibilism is false. The source incompatibilist agrees that “being determined” isn’t a problem; rather, it’s being determined by something or someone outside oneself. Ok, but then determinism (itself) is not incompatible with moral responsibility. So, I say, the source incompatibilist who denies the PAP is granting compatibilism (as normally defined to be the thesis that moral responsibility and determinism are compatible).

Timpe objects:

Moreover, Bignon is wrong to claim this sort of response (which he rightly attributes to me) “concedes” (132) that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism given that it holds responsibility is compatible with one’s moral character ruling out sinful actions. As Bignon notes earlier “determinism is [the view] that everything that comes to pass is determined” (4, emphasis added). My view certainly does not involve thinking that determinism so understood is compatible with moral responsibility.³⁶

There may be a slight disconnect here, because what I say concedes compatibilism is the move from leeway to (narrow) source incompatibilism, not Timpe’s above attempt to maintain the PAP for event universals while rejecting it for event particulars, or to affirm a PAP with inconsistent levels of granularity. So, Timpe seems to think he holds the view and my argument fails, but I now think Timpe *doesn’t* hold the view and my argument hits. What I argue concedes compatibilism is

³⁵ Bignon, 121-129.

³⁶ Timpe, 377.

source incompatibilism *sans PAP*.³⁷ If Timpe affirms the PAP, he isn't admitting compatibilism after all (but then the refutation of the PAP refutes his flavor of source incompatibilism). As to *narrow* source incompatibilists, can they avoid the charge that their view is admitting compatibilism? I don't think they can. They may protest while thinking of humans that are created and determined, and it's clear that source incompatibilism still rules out *their* responsibility. But forget created humans. My argument shows it's possible to have a self-existing, determined being whose determined character comes from within, so that he can satisfy the source-incompatibilist criteria, and thus be morally responsible. If this scenario is *possible*, then compatibilism is true in some possible world, which entails it's true in every possible world, including ours. Compatibilism is true.

Now, I should note that this fun fact doesn't do much by way of refutation; it's just giving us a permission to engage in a bit of naughty name-calling with source incompatibilists who probably don't like to be called compatibilists. But then, is there a positive argument against even the more modest demands of (narrow) source-incompatibilists? Can we present them with a moral agent who is morally responsible even though he fails to meet not only the demands of *leeway* incompatibilists (like God does), but also the more modest demands of (narrow) *source* incompatibilists? Clearly, we can no longer use God for that, since God meets the sourcehood condition. But that is where my second positive argument comes in, because it pertains to created human beings, whose inability to live a sinless life traces back to factors beyond themselves, so *they* don't meet the sourcehood condition. Are we then going to say they are not responsible for failing to live a sinless life? Let's see what Timpe responds to that argument.

ON PELAGIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM

The first thing Timpe responds is that universalism may be fine for libertarians:

For one, while I think the libertarian should reject what I referred to as necessary universalism above, that horn of the *reductio* would need to show that even contingent universalism (the view that as a matter of fact all are redeemed) is false. But Bignon can't do this without engaging the soteriological doctrines that he set aside in chapter 1.³⁸

³⁷ In the book, I do not draw Timpe's "narrow vs wide" distinction, so when I argue source incompatibilism grants compatibilism, it sure sounds like Timpe is targeted by my criticism. But I no longer think he is, since he does affirm a leeway condition over against the "narrow" source incompatibilists who are the proper target of my argument.

³⁸ Timpe, 377.

Yes, my argument takes it as a premise that universalism is false. I don't hide this, it's the very first sentence I write on this argument:

Even more so than the previous one, this next argument features premises that are designed to appeal to traditional Christians. It does not weigh much in interactions with advocates of incompatibilism who also reject traditional Christian orthodoxy, but for those committed to fairly essential Christian doctrines, it should make the acceptance of PAP_{All} very costly.³⁹

In short, I don't enter the ring to defend that premise, I just think universalism is false, and invite incompatibilists who agree with me about that, to consider the fact that their view entails Pelagianism. But Timpe disagrees there too:

The other horn, namely the charge of Pelagianism, can also be avoided. As Bignon constructs it, the truth of PAP_{All} would entail that a human can do a morally good action simply on the basis of works and without the grace of God. But this would only be true if a lack of grace is part of the outside factors that we hold fixed, and the libertarian need not (and, I think, ought not) grant this.⁴⁰

But yes, he must. The incompatibilist version of the PAP makes the claim that moral responsibility requires the *categorical* ability to do otherwise. That means the agent must be able to do otherwise while we hold *all* causally relevant circumstances just as they are. That must include "the grace of God," which Timpe construes here as a positive moral influence on the sinner. When he says that the relative "lack of grace" doesn't need to be held fixed in alternate scenarios, he is merely saying that the sinners could avoid sinning *if only God gave them more grace than he in fact does*. But that is only an affirmation of conditional ability. Even *I* could affirm this much. That doesn't satisfy the incompatibilist demands for leeway freedom. And keep in mind that this call for alternate possibilities must be made even by the mere *source*-incompatibilist. He may not escape by saying "oh but I don't affirm the PAP." *In this case*, he must. Indeed, the source incompatibilist does call for leeway if the agent isn't self-existent. The only case in which the source-incompatibilist ceases to call for leeway is when the agent's inability to do otherwise is rooted in his self-existent nature, and hence can't be traced back to a source outside himself. In short, source-incompatibilism says that moral responsibility requires one of two things: 1. being un-created, or 2. being created and having leeway. Humans are created. So, they must have leeway. Therefore, even the source incompatibilist must affirm that fallen humans, who are morally responsible for failing to live a

³⁹ Bignon, 133.

⁴⁰ Timpe, 377.

sinless life, have leeway: they have the categorical, Pelagian ability to live a sinless life indeed. The argument goes through.

My book treats other incompatibilists' unsuccessful attempts to escape the dilemma, but Timpe doesn't use them in his response, so I won't reproduce them here.

ON DIVINE INVOLVEMENT IN EVIL

When it comes to part II of my book, on “Blaming God” for evil, Timpe faithfully summarizes my work, and doesn't argue against it. Whether he accepts my points isn't clear, but there isn't any criticism for me to defend against here. The only point he makes is that he finds it “surprising” that:

Bignon grants in passing that Calvinism is worse than Arminianism with respect to the problem of evil since there are evils that “God could have brought about with less suffering on Calvinism, since God could have controlled the inner workings of the heart more successfully” [175].⁴¹

It's not all that important, but I must first clarify that Timpe took my sentence out of context, and as he cropped its subject to supply his own, he mistakenly made me say something I didn't say. I wasn't talking about God bringing about “some evils,” with less suffering. I was talking about God bringing about *some libertarian free choices* (which may well be good), by means of some natural evil to influence human hearts, a tool which God may not have needed, if only he had been able to determine the outcome of the free choice by working in human hearts directly.

But that misunderstanding of my sentence isn't problematic, because I do happen to grant more or less what Timpe says I granted: that to some extent, Arminianism is better-off than Calvinism to answer the atheist argument from evil against God's existence. I do affirm that. I'm not sure it's “surprising,” I have lectured openly on that elsewhere,⁴² and it doesn't strike me as too controversial: the libertarian has a resource against the problem of evil that the compatibilist cannot use. That of course doesn't mean that Arminianism is overall better, only that it's more useful at rejecting the problem of evil. It's a strength of Arminianism I recognize. I just think “being false” is a weakness which on balance makes Arminianism less than ideal.

⁴¹ Timpe, 378.

⁴² Guillaume Bignon, “Calvinists and Arminians on the Problem of Evil: Who Can Say What?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bev656ReOss&t=1611s>

ON THE TRUTH OF DETERMINISM

My book defended the *compatibility* of Calvinist determinism with moral responsibility and with divine righteousness, and some of my arguments also offered positive reasons to think compatibilism is indeed true. But Timpe rightly notes that all this doesn't mean *determinism* is automatically true, nor do I try to prove determinism in the book:

Bignon notes on the last page of Part I that the arguments therein show at most that theological compatibilism is true, but not that theological determinism is also true. So at most Part I shows that if Calvinist determinism were true, human moral responsibility wouldn't be ruled out. The arguments of Part II don't show that theological determinism is true either; rather, they show that if Calvinist determinism is true, it does not follow that God is morally blameworthy for causing evil. In this sense, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* is a defensive book.⁴³

That's right. That was the aim of my book. I mostly sought to fend off the two most important families of arguments offered against Calvinist determinism, showing in detail that they don't work. Then, toward the end of the book, I just mentioned in passing the avenues traditionally pursued by others to establish determinism. I don't personally develop these avenues in the book, but Timpe picks up on them:

What reasons are there for thinking theological determinism is true? Bignon mentions both biblical grounds and philosophical grounds (229). The biblical issues aren't discussed at great length, and when they are, I think the treatment is overly confident (see, e.g., 176–177).⁴⁴

I don't see at all what's overly confident in my "treatment of biblical issues" on pages 176-177.

On the contrary, I'm particularly modest in the claims I make in that section. I almost claim nothing. I don't even offer a Calvinist exegesis, all I do is quote a number of passages to give a "preliminary dose of biblical perspective," to show that the Bible isn't shy about implicating God in evil. I don't claim it refutes Arminianism, I don't claim it teaches compatibilism, or determinism, or anything of the sort. All I do is list a few passages in which God is said to be in control of evil in some important way, so that the reader keeps them in mind as he reads my philosophical arguments, to appreciate that they "mesh well" with that stream of biblical teaching. It's hard to see how this mild of a treatment can be overconfident. If anything, I anticipate to be criticized by Calvinists for being somewhat of a milquetoast, here. That's fine by me, but then I doubt Timpe can reasonably charge me with "overconfidence" in this section.

⁴³ Timpe, 378-379.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 379.

As to the philosophical arguments for determinism that I mentioned, he notes:

The philosophical grounds all proceed from objections to libertarianism. And, as Bignon notes elsewhere, the falsity of libertarianism doesn't entail theological determinism.⁴⁵

Well, the falsity of libertarianism *in itself* does not entail theological determinism indeed. But first, all of the arguments I list *are* arguments for determinism,⁴⁶ and second, an argument from the falsity of libertarianism to the truth of theological determinism may very well run like this: libertarianism is false for one of two reasons: either no agent is ever responsible, or incompatibilism is false. Given that disjunction, if we agree that some humans *are* sometimes morally responsible, then it's incompatibilism that must be false. Thus, the falsity of libertarianism gives us the truth of compatibilism, and then one may offer an argument for why theological determinism is true if we suppose the truth of theological compatibilism and add a few more modest premises. I have done that elsewhere too,⁴⁷ but that wasn't really the burden of my book. Rather, it was to offer defenses against the charge that Calvinism is "excusing sinners and blaming God," and that much I have done.

CONCLUSION

Timpe closes his review on a positive note:

Despite the limitations I've noted, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* is worth reading. As Paul Helm says in the volume's forward, this book is "as thorough defense [of theological determinism and compatibilism] as you'll find" (ix). As such, it should be read both by philosophers of religion interested in various models of divine providence and by those philosophers interested in the compatibilism/incompatibilism debates.⁴⁸

I am grateful for the kind words, and for the thoughtful engagement with my arguments, which gave me the opportunity to solidify their defense here, and push their discussion a bit further.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The arguments based on foreknowledge and providence, or the argument from arbitrariness/randomness, or the argument from purpose in evil, all aim to establish determinism.

⁴⁷ Guillaume Bignon, "Does Compatibilism Entail Determinism? A Pragmatic Argument from Purpose in Evil" <http://theologui.blogspot.com/2014/11/does-compatibilism-entail-determinism.html>

⁴⁸ Timpe, 379.