

Why Christians Might be Libertarians A Response to Lynne Rudder Baker

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Introduction

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Lynne Rudder Baker voices her bewilderment at the “surprising number of Christian philosophers today [who] take it to be obvious that human beings have free will as libertarians construe it. Not only do they take us to have free will, but they also take a libertarian conception of free will to be important for Christian practice and theology.”¹ Baker finds this tendency to be surprising for two reasons. First, she thinks that a “rejection of libertarian accounts of free will would make the solutions to certain philosophical problems for Christians very easy” (461). Among the problems that she thinks a compatibilist account of free will would help, she mentions the traditional doctrine of divine providence and the problem of the compatibility of human freedom and divine foreknowledge. The second reason Baker gives why the prevalence of libertarianism among Christian philosophers is surprising is that “there is a lot of room for the denial of libertarian accounts in the Christian tradition, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant” (462).² In contrast to what she takes as the dominant tendency among contemporary Christian philosophers towards libertarianism, Baker advocates a compatibilist understanding of free will.

¹ Lynne Rudder Baker, “Why Christians Should Not be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003): 460. Subsequent references to this article will be made parenthetically in the text. Despite the anecdotal evidence Baker gives that libertarianism is “the prevailing view of Christian philosophers today” (460), I am not convinced that this is the case, though I think that it is likely true. Nevertheless, in what follows, I will follow Baker in her assessment and description of the current situation.

² Given her argument later that libertarianism commits one to an unorthodox view of grace, it is perplexing that Baker writes here *as if* both libertarian and compatibilist understandings of free will can find room within the Christian tradition.

More specifically, she argues that both salvation and faith, the human response to salvation, are best understood along compatibilist lines.

I do not disagree with Baker that compatibilism makes certain issues in the philosophy of religion easier to deal with. Furthermore, I also do not take it that orthodox Christianity entails a commitment to libertarianism. Despite my own libertarian leanings, I am not prepared to argue here that Christians must, or even should, be libertarians. Nevertheless, in what follows I would like to raise a methodological worry for Baker's argument. Despite admitting that the Christian tradition is wide enough to include both libertarians and compatibilists, given the normative nature of her essay's title, she apparently thinks that theological issues favor the compatibilist's position. But if the orthodox Christian theological tradition can accommodate both positions vis-à-vis free will, then presumably the position that Christians ought to embrace will have considerations in its favor that, when taken on the whole, outweigh the reasons for embracing the contrary position. As I understand her article, Baker lays out the considerations that favor compatibilism via a two-pronged argument. The first prong of her project is to "undercut some motivation for belief in a libertarian conception of free will" (464); the second is to show that a libertarian account "conflicts with traditional theism" (464). With respect to the first prong, I think that Baker fails to fully motivate why many Christian philosophers are attracted to libertarianism. With respect to the second prong, I shall show that Baker's compatibilism is faced with a dilemma, one horn of which she rejects and the other of which entails a position that itself conflicts with traditional theism. After addressing these two issues, I will show that Baker has failed to do what she has set out to do: she has failed to give decisive reasons why the Christian should be a compatibilist rather than a libertarian.

Terms

Before I turn my attention to elaborating my methodological problems with Baker's two-pronged attack on libertarianism, let me first say a few words about some of the terms she employs. Care must be taken in discussions of libertarianism and compatibilism due to the ease with which different authors can use these terms and their cognates to refer to different philosophical positions. For example, "compatibilism" can refer either to the thesis that free will is compatible with the truth of causal determinism,³ or to

³ As I am using the term "causal determinism," or simply "determinism" for short, is the thesis that the conjunction of the state of the entire physical universe at any time and the laws of nature entails the state of the entire physical universe at any other moment in time.

the thesis that free will is compatible with divine ordination of all events.⁴ Similarly, “libertarianism” can refer to a thesis about either moral responsibility or free will.⁵ Baker uses both of these terms in reference to free will. According to her, an account of free will is *compatibilist* “if and only if it entails that a person *S*’s having free will with respect to an action (or choice) *A* is compatible with *A*’s being caused ultimately by factors outside of *S*’s control” (460). Thus, her use of the term is wide enough to include both the causal and theological uses of “compatibilism” mentioned above. Similarly, Baker says that an account of free will is *libertarian* “if and only if it entails that a conditions of a person *S*’s having free will with respect to an action (or choice) *A* is that *A* is not ultimately caused by factors outside of *S*’s control” (460). So understood, the root difference between these two positions is over the ultimate control of an agent’s actions—must an agent have “ultimate-causal control” over her actions in order to be free? It should also be noted, however, that it appears that Baker would not be happy to establish that only a few human actions are ultimately caused by God; rather it seems that she wishes to establish the stronger claim that God is the ultimate-causal source of every human action. The importance of this clarification, I believe, will become evident in the following discussion.

Motivations for Libertarianism

In this section, I will attempt to further explain the various motivations that Christian philosophers may have for embracing libertarianism because I believe that, in weighing the relative strengths of libertarianism and compatibilism, Baker has failed to appreciate fully a number of reasons that Christian philosophers have for being libertarians. Perhaps one of the strongest reasons for embracing libertarianism is what is often called the Consequence Argument.⁶ A classic and highly influential version of the Consequence Argument can be found in Peter van Inwagen’s *An Essay on Free Will*. Van Inwagen informally presents the Consequence Argument as

⁴ Of course, the latter is compatible with the former, although it does not entail it.

⁵ For a discussion of the relationship between the compatibilism/incompatibilism debate regarding moral responsibility and the debate whether causal determinism precludes metaphysical freedom, see Ted Warfield’s “Metaphysical Compatibilism’s Appropriation of Frankfurt” (forthcoming).

⁶ According to a more widely-used terminology, the Consequence Argument is only an argument for incompatibilism, which is the thesis that free action is incompatible with the truth of causal determinism. This understanding of incompatibilism, when conjoined with the thesis that at least some human actions are the result of free will, entails the position that is often referred to as “libertarianism.” The reader should note that Baker’s use of the term “libertarianism” is closer to the more widely-used sense of “incompatibilism,” since nothing in her definition of libertarianism commits one to the thesis that there are free actions.

follows: "If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us."⁷ The Consequence Argument, and especially the Beta inference rule it employs, has been the subject of much philosophical scrutiny.⁸ Nevertheless, consideration of *some* version of the Consequence Argument gives strong motivation for many Christian philosophers to be libertarians, a motivation that Baker never mentions. In order to understand the motivations for libertarians, one should expect Baker to address this sort of argument.⁹

Furthermore, there is also a theological version of the Consequence Argument that motivates some Christian philosophers to be libertarians. Consider for the moment what would be the case if compatibilism were true and God determined all human actions, that is, if God's willing of a human agent's action was necessary and together with the existence of that human agent jointly sufficient for the human agent to perform any action in question. No human agent has ultimate-causal control over her own existence; nor does she have such control over divine volitions. But if theological compatibilism is true, then, necessarily, if God creates an agent and wills that

⁷ Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 16.

⁸ In particular, I have in mind the counterexample to Beta provided by Thomas McKay and David Johnson, which they call the principle of Agglomeration. See McKay and Johnson, "A Reconsideration of an Argument against Compatibilism," *Philosophical Topics* 24 (1996): 113–22. Despite the falsity of Beta, however, I believe a version of the Consequence Argument can be given that the Christian philosopher can take to provide good reason for embracing libertarianism. As Alicia Finch and Ted Warfield have argued, the Consequence Argument can be salvaged by replacing Beta in the original Consequence Argument with a strengthened transfer principle, which they call Beta 2:

Beta 2: $\Box(p \rightarrow q) \ \& \ Np$ implies Nq .

(Alicia Finch and Ted A. Warfield, "The *Mind* Argument and Libertarianism," *Mind* 107 (1998): 521). Using Beta 2, Finch and Warfield give a modified version of the Consequence Argument. Let P be any true proposition; let P_0 be a proposition expressing the complete state of the world at a time in the distant past; and L be a proposition expressing the junction of the laws of nature. In order to avoid debates arising out of the understanding of the N -operator, I will use it to mean that no agent has the sort of "ultimate-causal control" over p that Baker thinks is the hallmark of libertarianism. We therefore have the following argument:

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|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) | $\Box((P_0 \ \& \ L) \rightarrow P)$ | (definition of determinism) |
| (2) | $N(P_0 \ \& \ L)$ | |
| (3) | $N(P)$ | (1, 2, Beta 2) |

This modified version of the Consequence argument avoids McKay and Johnson's Agglomeration counterexample since it incorporates Beta 2 rather than Beta.

⁹ The compatibilist account of free will that Baker endorses on pages 467ff has much in common with that proposed by Harry Frankfurt in, among other places, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5–20. As a result, it is likely that she would not be moved by consideration of the Consequence Argument. Nevertheless, the Consequence Argument is given weight by many Christian philosophers.

that agent do a particular action, then the agent will do that action. Thus, if theological compatibilism is true, then no human agent is the ultimate-causal source for any action.¹⁰ If one already has libertarian leanings, this version of the Consequence Argument gives one good reason to think that no human is ultimately responsible for any of her actions, and thus does not deserve to be punished for sin.¹¹

A second motivation for libertarianism shared by many Christian philosophers—this one addressed by Baker—is its apparent usefulness in dealing with the problem of evil. Baker writes that “with or without libertarian free will, evil is and remains inscrutable” (471).¹² I do not pretend that either libertarians or compatibilists have fully answered the problem of evil in all its various forms. Nevertheless, I think that libertarianism fares better in the face of the problem of evil than does compatibilism, since it has more resources to muster in its defense. If humans have libertarian free will, then God cannot create a world containing such agents and unilaterally guarantee that that world contains no evil. Libertarians can therefore maintain a distinction between possible worlds and feasible worlds. Compatibilism, on the other hand, cannot so easily make the claim that God cannot create a world containing such agents and unilaterally guarantee that that world contains no evil. If God is the ultimate cause of all human actions (either via determining the state of the physical universe at a time in the distant past or not), then

¹⁰ One could state a formal version of this argument along the following lines. Let G stand for the proposition “God creates human X,” W stand for the proposition “God is the ultimate-cause of X doing A” and A stand for the proposition “X does A.” Rule Beta 2 and the N-operator are used in the senses spelled out in footnote 8:

- (1') $\Box((G \ \& \ W) \rightarrow A)$
 (2') $N(G \ \& \ W)$
 (3') $N(A)$ (1', 2', Beta 2)

1' is true according to the theological compatibilist's position. If God is the ultimate source of human acts, then no human agent is the ultimate-causal source of the conjunction of her existence and God's willing that she do a particular action. QED.

¹¹ This is not to say that theological compatibilists cannot embrace 3' in the previous footnote and, when they conjoin it with a compatibilist understanding of moral responsibility such as the one Baker develops and defends on 467–71, hold that human agents can be properly punished for their sins despite not being the ultimate-causal source of those sins. Insofar as I am attempting to motivate the libertarian leanings of Christian philosophers, I am satisfied here with pointing out the position that the compatibilist is forced to take regarding sin. I, for one, think that the compatibilist's commitment to sin despite the lack of ultimate-causal control is telling against, even if not fatal to, the compatibilist's position.

¹² In personal correspondence, Baker writes “Evil seems to me complex and subtle and far beyond the reach of libertarian free will. Motivation for libertarianism based on its use in treating the problem of evil seems to me a weak reed indeed.” While I agree with Baker about the complexity and subtlety of the issues involved, I think that libertarianism does have additional resources to deal with the problem, as I show below.

He bears some direct responsibility for every action that occurs.¹³ With regard to the difficulties compatibilists face regarding the problem of evil, Baker writes that “Given God’s essential goodness, He cannot be the author of evil; but showing rationally the coherence of this truth with the existence of sin and evil is a difficult matter. I personally would take it on faith” (477n50). However, one’s faith seems faced with a more intractable problem if one holds that the object of one’s faith is the ultimate-causal source of all evils. To say that God is not the author of some evil act even though He is the ultimate cause of that act appears to many to be doublespeak.

There is another point to make regarding the problem of evil. Baker writes that “the pay-off for appeal to libertarian free will is very slight. At most, appeal to free will as libertarians construe it shows that there is no *logical* inconsistency between the goodness of God and the (bare) existence of moral evil” (471). It is true, as I conceded above, that the mere addition of libertarian free will does not make the problem of evil disappear in its entirety. But let us not downplay the significant progress libertarian accounts of free will have contributed to this debate. The Free Will Defense, for example, has changed what many in contemporary philosophy of religion take the problem of evil to be. Prior to the development of the Free Will Defense, opponents of religious belief developed the problem of evil along the lines of logical consistency: the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient God is incompatible with the existence of evil. Consider the following remarks of J. L. Mackie as representative:

It can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are *inconsistent* with one another. . . . In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent, God is wholly good; yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them are true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three.¹⁴

¹³ I say that God bears “some direct responsibility” for two reasons. One, I do not want to deny that, if compatibilism is true, human agents bear some responsibility for their own actions. To do so would be to beg the question against compatibilist accounts of moral responsibility. Second, insofar as even the libertarian would grant that no human agent exists who has not been created by God, all parties would grant that God bears some indirect responsibility for creating agents who are directed responsible for their actions. This indirect responsibility, I contend, is either not a form of moral responsibility or is related to moral responsibility only insofar as God should have had a morally justified reason for creating such beings given what He foreknew the sorts of actions that they would perform. This sort of responsibility, I take it, is not at issue in Baker’s article.

¹⁴ J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 92ff.

However, in large part due to Alvin Plantinga's development and popularization of the Free Will Defense, current debate regarding the problem of evil is more prominently developed along probabilistic lines: Does the existence of evil make the existence of an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, omniscient God less likely to be true (even if such an existence is possible)? To say that this development is "very slight" is to fail to appreciate the shift that has occurred in the past thirty years.¹⁵

A Problem for Compatibilism

I now turn my attention to the second prong of my response. Baker thinks that compatibilism is to be preferred to libertarianism because of the account of grace involved. However, the compatibilism that Baker advocates is faced with a dilemma regarding salvation. According to Baker, "the grace of God through Christ is necessary and sufficient for salvation" (462). This means, among other things, that a human's will plays no ultimate role in her salvation.¹⁶ Baker quotes with approval John Rist: "salvation is independent of man's fallen will; it is a matter of God's omnipotence. . . . If God wishes a man's salvation, salvation follows of *necessity*."¹⁷ Such a position, however, faces a dilemma based on the following disjunct: either God does not will the salvation of all or He does.

Let us begin with the first horn of this dilemma. If God does not will the salvation of all, then one wonders why. There does not appear to be any greater good served by God's not willing the salvation of all if possible. Baker rejects the view that God's giving of grace is based upon His foreknowledge of human faith. Thus, it looks as if God's will regarding the salvation of a particular human agent is arbitrary. God has no relevant information regarding a particular agent on which to base his willing of either salvation or damnation. Baker attempts to soften the concern over arbitrariness, for example, with regard to Augustine's position regarding unbaptized infants. According to Augustine, an unbaptized infant is "not admitted into the kingdom of heaven, even though he not only was not a Christian but

¹⁵ These comments are not intended to deny that there are those who dissent with the purported success of the Free Will Defense in dealing with the logical problem of evil. If Baker is among the dissenters, this might explain her evaluation of the "payoff of libertarian free will." It is also possible that Baker describes the shift from the logical problem to the evidential problem as "slight" because Christians should not have been worried about the logical problem in the first place.

¹⁶ I cannot fully address the issues involved with the interaction of free will and grace here. I hope to address these issues more fully in a future paper.

¹⁷ John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. R. A. Markus (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1972), 238, quoted in Baker, "Why Christians Should Not be Libertarians," 465.

could not have been one.”¹⁸ Baker is aware of the repugnance of such a position. If God fails to will the salvation of any, then He (and He alone) is the ultimate source of the eternal damnation of individuals. For this reason, she suggests that “we retain the content of Augustine’s doctrine of grace [that is, that grace is necessary and sufficient for salvation] and increase its scope” (464). These comments suggest that Baker, in fact, would choose the second horn of the dilemma.

According to the second horn, God does will the salvation of all. Since God’s will is sufficient for salvation, this position entails a commitment to universalism. Baker admits that neither Augustine nor his followers embraced universalism. Augustine’s rejection of universalism is easily seen, for example, in *The City of God*:

They [the damned] that are not of this society [the City of God] are destined to eternal misery, called the second death, because there, even the soul, being deprived of God, seems not to live, much less the body, bound in everlasting torments. And therefore, this second death shall be so much the more cruel, in that it shall never have end.¹⁹

In support of universalism, Baker cites 1 Timothy 2:4: “God wills that all men should be saved.” But there other interpretations of this passage available to the Christian. For example, Aquinas reconciles this Pauline passage with the fact that all are not saved via the distinction between God’s antecedent and consequent will. Roughly put, God’s antecedent will is what God wills absolutely but abstractly, independent of particular circumstances. God’s consequent will, on the other hand, is what He wills given the constraints of a particular circumstance:

A thing taken in its primary sense, and absolutely considered, may be good or evil, and yet when some additional circumstances are taken into account, by a consequent consideration may be changed into the contrary. Thus that a man should live is good; and that a man should be killed is evil, absolutely considered. But if in a particular case we add that a man is a murderer or dangerous to society, to kill him is a good; that he live is an evil. Hence it may be said of a just judge, that antecedently he wills all men to live; but consequently wills the murderer to be hanged. In the same way God antecedently wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts.²⁰

¹⁸ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, in *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 9.10, quoted in Baker, “Why Christians Should Not be Libertarians,” 464.

¹⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. John Healey (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1945), 19.28.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.19, a.6. For an insightful discussion of this point, see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 456ff.

There is thus reason to think that there are other ways to understand 1 Timothy 2:4 that do not commit one to universalism.

Besides this alternative interpretation of the Pauline passage Baker mentions, there are historical reasons for Christians to reject universalism. According to the Athanasian Creed, “they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.”²¹ Along these lines, Denis Pétau writes that

Nothing is more firmly rooted in the minds of Christians, both learned and uneducated, than that the torments of demons, and of damned men, since these too are immortal, will be eternal and will never end. This question we are addressing [that is, whether Christianity is consistent with universalism] will therefore seem to some to be superfluous and even ridiculous.²²

This is not to deny that there has been a minority within the church’s history who have affirmed universalism.²³ I cannot fully address universalism in the present response, given its ties to other theological issues such as church authority and tradition. However, as I think that these brief remarks make clear, universalism contradicts the church’s historical teaching regarding hell. Particularly given Baker’s desire to affirm “traditional [Christian] theism” (465), her embrace of universalism is perplexing.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to do two things: I have provided further motivation why Christian philosophers might be inclined toward libertarianism, and I have shown that Baker’s compatibilist view of salvation appears to commit her to universalism. These comments, of course, do not prove that libertarianism is the only position with respect to free will that is consistent with Christianity. I do think, however, that I have shown that Baker has failed to establish her conclusion that Christians should not be libertarians. Baker admits that the Christian tradition is wide enough to include both libertarians and compatibilists. Yet she thinks that Christians should be compatibilists because libertarianism commits one to

²¹ “Athanasian Creed,” Christian Classic Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html>.

²² Denis Pétau, *Theologicorum dogmatum tomus tertius* (Paris: n.p., 1644), T.3.199, quoted in D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 21.

²³ However, even most of those who have advocated such a position admit that it contradicts the dominate strand of Christian theology.

an unorthodox view of grace. She admits that compatibilists face a problem regarding evil, but says that she takes it on faith that there is a response to be given. But if she can give this response, one wonders why the libertarian cannot give a similar response. The libertarian can point out that Baker's compatibilism commits one to embracing an unorthodox position regarding hell. Similarly, the libertarian could "take it on faith" that there is an incompatibilist account of grace that avoids the heresy of Pelagianism. Thus, it looks as if both compatibilism and libertarianism have the resources to solve certain theological problems, while generating others that must be taken on faith. In order to establish that Christians should be compatibilists, Baker would need to either solve the problems facing the compatibilist's position, or show how the problems faced by compatibilism are not as bad as those faced by libertarianism. But she has done neither of these in her article. Thus, I believe that Baker has failed to do what she has set out to do: she has failed to give decisive reasons why the Christian should be a compatibilist rather than a libertarian.²⁴

²⁴ This paper was completed while I was a visiting fellow at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, where I presented an earlier draft and benefited from the comments and criticism provided by Robert Audi, Tom Flint, Balazs Mezei, Mike Murray, and Mike Rea. Thanks also to Lynne Rudder Baker for her comments on an earlier draft. I would also like to thank Makala Maybury, Gustavo Romero, and Alexandra Smith for their helpful comments.