

HEAVENLY FREEDOM: A REPLY TO COWAN

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In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Steven Cowan calls into question our success in responding to what we called the “Problem of Heavenly Freedom” in our earlier “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven.” In this reply, we defend our view against Cowan’s criticisms.

Introduction

We would like to thank Steven Cowan for his response to our earlier paper, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven.”¹ Our primary goal in that paper was to provide a satisfactory response to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom. As we define it there, the Problem of Heavenly Freedom is the result of a tension in the traditional view of heaven, which includes the following two theses:

(i) the redeemed in heaven have free will

and

(ii) the redeemed in heaven are no longer capable of sinning.

After laying out the Problem of Heavenly Freedom, we discussed and criticized four extant attempts to respond to it. We then offered our own response to this problem which, we argued, is better than the other views. To summarize very briefly, we argued for a version of libertarianism according to which an agent’s moral character puts constraints on the actions that she is capable of freely choosing to perform. The redeemed in heaven are such that their moral character prohibits them from choosing any sinful action insofar as they see no good reason for doing so. Yet since this is an internal (and freely formed) constraint, rather than an external one, it does not count against their being free.

In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Steven Cowan raises a two-fold objection to our view.² While he grants (i) and (ii) of the traditional view, he calls into question both our treatment of compatibilism as a response

¹Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26:4 (October 2009), 398–419.

²Steven Cowan, “Compatibilism and the Sinlessness of the Redeemed in Heaven,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28:4 (October 2011), 416–431. Parenthetical references in the text refer to Cowan’s article.



and our favored response to the problem of heavenly freedom. He writes: "I believe that the compatibilist solution can be adequately defended against their (and other related) objections. Secondly, I also intend to raise a few problems for their preferred libertarian solution" (417). In the following pages, we respond to both aspects of Cowan's criticism. We conclude that our proposed solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom is still the best available solution.

Cowan's Defense of Compatibilism

As mentioned above, in our original paper we considered and rejected four extant responses to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom; the first of these, and the one which Cowan favors, is compatibilism. According to Cowan, "*compatibilism . . . , at face value, offers the simplest and most straightforward resolution. . . . On this view of freedom, the Problem of Heavenly Freedom evaporates*" (417). It evaporates, he says, because, given compatibilism:

The redeemed in heaven, having characters that are perfectly formed to want only what is good and right, will consistently *freely* choose only what is good and right and will be incapable of choosing what is wrong. Their perfectly formed characters will prevent them from choosing what is wrong because they prevent them from wanting what is wrong. (417)

We agree. As we said in our previous article, "*if one is a compatibilist, and if one has a viable answer to the problem of evil that doesn't rely upon a Free Will Defense, then one already has an answer to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom without the cost we associate with this strategy.*"³ Furthermore, look back at the reasoning that Cowan provides for why the Problem of Heavenly Freedom evaporates on compatibilism. We think those two sentences are true on our account as well. In fact, we said similar things in favor of our view in our previous article. For instance, we wrote:

In heaven, the blessed will be incapable of willing any sin, just as we are incapable of willing the particular sin of torturing an innocent child for a nickel, and just as Teresa is incapable of willing to swindle from a homeless shelter for a luxurious vacation. This will be because of the character the redeemed have formed in their pre-heavenly existence. Given the perfection of their character, they will see no reason to engage in sinful and wicked actions.⁴

And so we conclude that, *if one is a compatibilist, and if one gives the above reasoning for the claim that the Problem of Heavenly Freedom evaporates on compatibilism, then one should likewise conclude that the Problem evaporates on our view as well.*

³Pawl and Timpe, "Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven," 402 (emphasis in the original).

⁴Ibid., 408.

Given that the Problem of Heavenly Freedom evaporates on the compatibilist view, why did we see fit to set it aside in our previous paper? Briefly, we argued like this: those who employ compatibilism as a solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom cannot use the Free Will Defense (FWD). This inability to use the FWD makes the problem of evil more acute, by which we mean that it is harder to provide a satisfactory response to the problem of evil if compatibilism is true. A response to one theological problem that makes another harder to solve is a disadvantage. So, compatibilism has a disadvantage as a response to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom. Cowan disagrees with us on at least two points. First, he claims that the compatibilist, *qua* compatibilist, can use the Free Will Defense. Second, he claims that the problem of evil is no more acute for the compatibilist than for the incompatibilist.

Concerning his first point, Cowan makes a distinction between what he calls the Strong Version of the Free Will Defense (FWD_s) and the Weak Version of the Free Will Defense (FWD_w). The Strong Version claims that free will, in and of itself, is such a great good that it, all by itself, outweighs all the actually occurring moral evil it makes possible. The Weak Version, by contrast, claims only that free will is a necessary condition for some other goods that, perhaps together with free will, are such great goods that they outweigh all the actually occurring moral evil.

Cowan argues that, whichever version of the Free Will Defense is true, the person who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by means of compatibilism can affirm the FWD as a defense. He further argues that we affirm the Strong Version, but the Strong Version is false. And he also argues that the Weak Version is a specific type of a general Greater Good Defense (GGD), and, since the GGD is adequate as a defense against the logical problem of evil, there is no good reason to favor the more specific FWD_w. We disagree with all but the claim that the Strong View is false.

Consider the first claim, that the person who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by means of compatibilism can affirm the FWD defense. We think this is false. The individual who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by means of compatibilism asserts the truth of compatibilism. In general, if one solves a problem by means of providing a solution, then one has to posit the truth of the solution. Even if the solution is merely a claim of epistemic possibility, one has to assert that epistemic possibility. Now the compatibilist solution provides compatibilism, and not merely "it is epistemically possible that compatibilism is true," as the solution. And so the compatibilist solution requires the positing of compatibilism. It is because of this positing of the truth of compatibilism that we consider the feasibility of employing the FWD given the assumption of the truth of compatibilism.⁵ One might ask here: does Cowan think that the FWD works on the assumption of compatibilism?

⁵*Ibid.*, 401.

The answer is that he thinks the FWD does *not* work on the assumption of compatibilism. For Cowan agrees with us that “the FWD works only if creatures have the libertarian freedom that makes it possible for them to sin” (418). But then, given that a person who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by positing compatibilism assumes the truth of compatibilism, on his view the compatibilist fails a necessary condition for putting the FWD to work. Thus, we deny that the person who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by positing compatibilism can employ the FWD.

One thing to emphasize here is that there may be different answers to the following two questions: (i) can a compatibilist employ the FWD and (ii) can someone who solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by means of positing the truth of compatibilism employ the FWD. Cowan sets out to defend the compatibilist solution, and not merely compatibilism (417). But we claim that so long as one is positing compatibilism as a solution, one is supposing its truth. And so long as one supposes its truth, one fails a necessary condition Cowan provides for employing the FWD. So we conclude that, as long as one solves the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by means of positing the truth of compatibilism, one fails a necessary condition for employing the FWD. And so, contrary to the claims of Cowan, a proponent of the compatibilist solution cannot employ the FWD.

Consider the second claim, that we affirm the Strong Version of the FWD. Cowan argues that we affirm the Strong Version, and further claims that we affirm what he calls 5_s , the claim that “Free will is a great good that justifies the existence of the moral evil that will occur if it exists” (419). He argues, though, that 5_s is false, for free will (understood in a libertarian sense), even if an intrinsic good, is not intrinsically good enough to outweigh even individual acts of evil.⁶ In addition, he says that “we know for a fact that the mere good of free will is *not* the reason why God allows evils in the world” (420).

We concede that 5_s is false. But why think that we ever claimed it to be true? Consider the evidence Cowan marshals for his claim that we have 5_s in mind. He writes:

When Pawl and Timpe write that “free will . . . is such a great good that it justifies the existence of the moral evil that it makes possible” (cited above), it would appear that FWD_s [which includes 5_s] is the version of the FWD they hold. (419)

The problem with using this passage to justify our acceptance of 5_s is that it is incomplete. The beginning of the relevant clause, as Cowan quotes it earlier, is missing here. The quotation should start seven words back with the phrase: “it is possible that the existence of . . .” Cowan is supporting the claim that we believe X from a quotation in which we say “Possibly, X .”

⁶See Cowan, 420n7.

Moreover, both times Cowan quotes this passage—the first time and the second time in which he doesn't include the modal operator at the beginning of the quotation—he omits an essential parenthetical. For, in our article, our full sentence is

According to the Free Will Defense, the reason that moral evils do not contradict God's essential goodness is that it is possible that the existence of free will (*and those additional goods which logically require that some agents have free will*) is such a great good that it justifies the existence of the moral evil that it makes possible.⁷

When the whole sentence is considered, it should be clear that it is a gross misunderstanding of our view to claim that, in this sentence, we are asserting that “free will . . . is such a great good that it justifies the existence of the moral evil that it makes possible.” It is only after excising the parenthetical, and, then in a second surgery, cutting farther through the modal prefix to our claim, that Cowan arrives at a statement that could be used to defend his point.

Consider the third claim. Cowan claims that the Free Will Defense is just a species of a broader, perfectly adequate response to the logical problem of evil: the Greater Good Defense (GGD). The FWD says that it is possible that there is a greater good (free will) which requires the possibility of evil for its actualization. The GGD says the same thing, except it leaves out the parenthetical. Both work equally well in defeating the logical problem of evil, says Cowan, so what's so special about keeping the FWD?

In response, the FWD is so special because free will is by far the most common greater good alluded to for the GGD. It isn't that there are multiple standard greater goods, all with equal esteem, such that taking away the FWD leaves a bevy of other worthy candidates for a greater good. Rather, removing the FWD, as we believe proponents of the compatibilist solution do, takes away the clear frontrunner. This, we believe, makes the problem of evil more acute. And so far as we can tell, nothing in Cowan's reply changes this fact.

Cowan's second main point in response to our claims concerning compatibilism as a response to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom is to argue that compatibilism makes the problem of evil no more acute than libertarianism does. This is because, he says, God's causing evil (as the compatibilist has it, says Cowan) is no more morally odious than God's allowing evil (as the libertarian has it). Suppose this is true. Even if it is true, and even if Cowan has shown one aspect in which libertarianism and compatibilism are equally acute, this doesn't show that compatibilism doesn't make the problem more acute for the reason we give: that those who solve the Problem of Heavenly Freedom by positing the truth of compatibilism are unable to employ the FWD.

⁷Pawl and Timpe, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven,” 401 (emphasis added).

Cowan's Criticisms Of Our View

In the previous section, we focused on Cowan's criticism of our discussion of the compatibilist's solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom. In this section, we address his criticisms of our positive solution. Cowan raises two objections to our preferred account of heavenly freedom. Neither of these objections, in our view, is compelling.

Cowan's first objection to our preferred account, which he notes would also be an objection to James Sennett's view in "Is There Freedom in Heaven?"⁸ is as follows:

On both accounts, it is argued that to make moral sense of the limitation on the freedom of the redeemed in heaven, it must be the case that the redeemed have libertarian freedom at some earlier time, the exercise of which was causally relevant to the formation of their later choice-limiting characters. (428)

Cowan is right that our view requires a tracing-sensitive version of libertarianism. In a passage that Cowan quotes, we wrote: "On the view we are advancing, if a non-divine agent is free and has a moral character that precludes sin, there must have been a prior time when the agent was free and didn't have a moral character that precludes sin."⁹ Responding to this passage, Cowan writes:

In a footnote, they admit, "The qualifier 'non-divine' here is needed due to issues arising from the freedom of God Himself." Exactly! The qualifier is "needed" given what we believe about God's own freedom and their need to defend libertarian freedom for human beings. But from a compatibilist perspective, an insistence on this asymmetry can only be seen as question-begging. A compatibilist can say (this one *does* say) that God's kind of freedom is a model for our freedom and God's freedom doesn't look a whole lot like libertarian freedom, at least not the "full-blown" kind that includes the ability to sin. (429)

In response to this objection, we first deny that we are begging the question, we then consider a related charge that Cowan might mean instead, and we finally note a difficulty in interpreting the claim.

Concerning the charge of question-begging, what is the question being begged, and whom are we begging it against? Our claim begs the question from "a compatibilist perspective," so we take it that what we've done here is beg the question against the compatibilist. And what we've inappropriately assumed, we suppose, is the denial of compatibilism. It is hard to say exactly what begging the question amounts to in general, but it is at least something like assuming your conclusion as a premise, or employing the conclusion as evidence for a premise, or employing a premise that one would affirm only if one already affirmed the conclusion. Something like that. Now, at the point in our previous paper where we provide this

⁸James Sennett, "Is There Freedom in Heaven?" *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999), 69–82.

⁹Pawl and Timpe, "Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven," 415.

footnote, we are more than a dozen pages past our treatment of compatibilism, and our claim: “Thus, in what follows, we will proceed under the assumption of the truth of incompatibilism.”¹⁰ At this point in the paper, we are not arguing against the compatibilist. And so the charge that we have begged a question against the compatibilist misses what it is we are doing in the paper at that time.

Perhaps what Cowan means here is that the asymmetry between how we understand divine and human freedom is a theoretical disadvantage, rather than that we are begging the question against the compatibilist.¹¹ Developing a full account of (i) what God’s freedom is like and (ii) how our freedom is unlike God’s freedom is obviously a project for another time.¹² Nevertheless, we think there are a number of reasons why it is that God’s freedom does not require some prior time at which God could have sinned, whereas ours does require prior ability to sin. First, God has his moral character essentially and, as we argued in our earlier paper, an agent’s moral character puts constraints on what choices he is capable of freely choosing. With respect to creaturely agents, if we are to have such a character that sinful options are no longer possible for us to choose, then we must have the time available to develop such a character. Second, if God is immutable, as we think he is, he’d be unable to change his moral character over time. Our account, however, is built upon the need for free creatures to develop their moral character into one that is fit for heaven. Third, God’s atemporality renders problematic the notion that God has a history. Finally, if one is attracted to the notion that God is simple, then there is no distinction between God and God’s moral character: God is identical with his moral character. Not only God’s moral character but God himself would be worse if he had the ability to freely sin. Insofar as creatures are mutable, temporal, and metaphysically complex, we should expect our free will to be different than divine freedom in important ways. While we haven’t argued for these doctrines regarding the divine nature, we think that this quick discussion is sufficient to show that the asymmetry is well motivated. And we see no reason to say that the asymmetry between divine and human freedom regarding the ability to sin is question-begging.

Finally, it’s not clear to us what “full-blown” is supposed to add in this context. If freedom is “full-blown” just in case it includes the ability to sin, then it’s trivially true on our view that the redeemed in heaven don’t have

¹⁰Ibid., 401.

¹¹A referee suggests this as a more charitable reading of Cowan’s claim.

¹²One of us is actively working on this project; see Timpe’s forthcoming book *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (Bloomsbury). For a sketch of how divine freedom is both like and unlike human freedom, see Kevin Timpe, “An Analogical Approach to Divine Freedom,” *Proceedings of the Irish Philosophical Society*, ed. Susan Gottlöber (2012). And as Cowan himself notes in a footnote, we’re not the first to argue along these lines: Anselm, among others, has already done so. See his footnote 25 on pages 428–429. See also Katherin Roger’s *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), particularly chapter 10.

“full-blown” freedom. But then neither does God, so we don’t see that as problematic. In fact, in our original paper, we gave three reasons why one should reject the view that free will always requires the ability to do morally evil actions; we won’t rehash those reasons here.¹³ If “full-blown” is instead supposed to indicate a degree of goodness such that “full-blown” freedom is superior to non-“full-blown” freedom, then we deny that the ability to sin is part of what makes freedom “full-blown.” As we indicated in our earlier paper, since God is an essentially omnibenevolent being, He cannot freely sin. And we see no reason to insist that the redeemed will have a kind of freedom that God does not have, particularly when the having of that freedom indicates a failing of moral character in the redeemed. Furthermore, we see no reason why one should judge freedom-plus-ability-to-sin as inherently better than freedom-minus-ability-to-sin. If, as perfect being theology holds, God is essentially morally perfect, then there is a range of sinful activities that God cannot do; we don’t think that God’s perfection is undermined by not having the ability to sin. Granted, one needs to have an account of (i) what God’s freedom is like and (ii) how our freedom is unlike God’s freedom. We have offered the beginnings of such an account above.

Cowan’s second and final objection to our view attacks our claim that the blessed in heaven might have alternate morally relevant possibilities open to them. He writes:

My second objection is aimed at Pawl’s and Timpe’s account of morally relevant actions in heaven. They argue that the redeemed in heaven can have libertarian freedom despite not being able to sin as long as they can freely choose between multiple good options that are morally relevant in a way that makes the one who does them morally better than one who doesn’t. Pawl and Timpe suggest that *supererogatory actions* would fit the bill. (429)

A small point first. If we read “A as long as B” to imply the truth of “if A, then B,” then Cowan’s description of our view is false.¹⁴ We do not claim that the redeemed can have libertarian freedom so long as they can freely choose between multiple morally relevant options. On our view, they would still count as free even if they had no morally relevant options available.¹⁵ That said, many desire freedom to be non-trivial, or significant, or morally relevant in some way, and we attempt to meet this desire by providing a definition of moral relevance and an account of how choices can be morally relevant in heaven insofar as there can still be a grading of good and better actions to perform.

¹³See Pawl and Timpe, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven,” 414ff.

¹⁴This seems to us to be a standard reading of the phrase “A as long as B.” If the ticket agent says you can fly as long as you have a ticket, and you do not have a ticket, it seems reasonable to conclude that you cannot fly. But that inference works only if the “as long as” functions in the way we read it.

¹⁵See, for instance, Pawl and Timpe, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven,” 408 and 414–415.

Cowan believes that supererogatory actions will not work to provide a distinction between morally relevant objects for the redeemed to choose freely among, given some other things we say. For we say that while the redeemed have perfected characters, insofar as they are determinately and unambiguously on the mean with respect to every virtue, and are so habituated in the virtues that they couldn't act contrary to the mean, they might still be said to grow in virtue insofar as there may be no upper limit on the tenacity with which they cling to the mean. Then we write:

If we think about clinging to the good rather than clinging to the mean, we can say that through the everlasting years that the blessed spend with God, they are neverendingly coming ever closer to Him, who is Goodness itself, ever clinging more tenaciously to Him.¹⁶

Cowan claims that the redeemed will see that they can cling more tenaciously to the mean of a particular virtue by acting in accord with that virtue. Further, the supererogatory actions will bring one to cling more tenaciously to a mean than the merely obligatory actions will. Finally, if the redeemed reason as we do in the immediately preceding block quotation, they will see that they will cling more tenaciously to God the more supererogatory actions they perform. But who among the redeemed wouldn't want to cling as tenaciously as possible to God? And so they will either view the less-than-supererogatory actions as not choice-worthy, given their ardent desire for closeness with God, or they will view the so-called supererogatory choices as obligatory insofar as they might view it as their obligation to grow in closeness to God. Cowan writes:

In either case—whether out of a sense of obligation or an overriding desire for beatitude, or both—it would follow that none of the redeemed in heaven could refrain from “neverendingly coming closer to Him” by performing the supererogatory actions that Pawl and Timpe describe. If this pursuit is obligatory (as I suggest it might be), then the so-called “supererogatory” actions turn out not really to be supererogatory after all. But, even if they are not obligatory and are truly supererogatory, they cannot be libertarianly free actions. For no redeemed person in heaven, given his morally perfect character (in Pawl's and Timpe's *first* sense [that of being perfectly on the mean of a virtue]), could conceivably refrain from doing them. (431)

In response to this argument, note that our quotation is a conditional, “if we think about clinging to the good . . .” If Cowan has in fact shown that something untoward follows from the consequent of the conditional, then we can respond with a *Modus Tollens* and deny the antecedent of the conditional as well. What Cowan has shown, in that case, is that we shouldn't think of clinging to the mean as clinging to the good. Or perhaps he has shown that even if we do think of clinging to the mean as clinging to the good, we shouldn't think of that good being clung to as Goodness itself—that is, God. That is a useful thing to know, but neither it

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 416.

nor this argument falsifies our conditional. If we respond in this fashion, then the motivation that Cowan gives for the blessed—neverendingly coming closer to God—would be removed. They wouldn't be able to come closer to God by supererogatory actions, and so the motivation for seeing such actions as obligatory or eminently choice-worthy would be missing. Put otherwise, we can deny that the redeemed actually do become closer to God in heaven, which is sufficient to meet Cowan's second objection, without having to backtrack on anything we said in our previous article.

In short, this second objection to our positive account targets a non-load-bearing assertion in our original article. It was included because we thought the image was, well, nice. But the image, and the assertion, are not parts of the philosophical theory we put forward. And even if, in the end, we have to say that the nice image is not true to reality—the Redeemed do not cling ever more tightly to God in heaven—this does not falsify any claim we made; not even the non-load-bearing conditional assertion.¹⁷

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered the claims Cowan made in defense of employing a compatibilist solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom, as well as his objections to our own position. We have argued that, contra Cowan, we did not affirm the Strong Version of the Free Will Defense in our earlier article. We have also argued that Cowan's first objection to our positive account—that the asymmetry between God's freedom and "full-blown" human freedom begs the question against the compatibilist—fails. Finally, we have argued that Cowan's second objection to our positive account—that supererogative actions cannot provide for morally relevant freedom, given other things we say—fails. We conclude, once again, that our proposed view is the best solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom.¹⁸

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¹⁷An anonymous reader suggests that we could say that the redeemed increase in the number or frequency of supererogatory acts over time. While this is another move that we might make in response to Cowan's second objection here, the paragraph above should indicate why we don't think we need to go this route.

¹⁸We would like to thank Thomas Flint, James Sennett, Thomas Talbott, Jerry Walls, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Work on this paper was generously supported by the Notre Dame Center for the Philosophy of Religion and the Templeton Foundation, both in the form of Analytic Theology Summer Stipends for the authors and in the form of a year-long Analytic Theology Research Fellowship for one of the authors.