

**David E. Alexander and Daniel Johnson, eds.**  
***Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*. Eugene, OR: Wipf  
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As David Alexander and Daniel Johnson point out in their introduction, very few Christian philosophers self-identify as Calvinists. There might be various reasons for this, but one major reason seems to be this: Calvinists deny that humans have libertarian free will; so, Calvinists cannot (so it's alleged) avail themselves of the usual sorts of free will defenses on offer against the problem of evil. And since most Christian philosophers don't self-identify as Calvinists, it's not surprising when various volumes dedicated to issues in philosophical theology exclude (or, at any rate, fail to include) articles from the Calvinist perspective.<sup>1</sup>

But, as Alexander and Johnson also point out, Calvinism's failure to catch on in the professional ranks of academic philosophy doesn't at all seem to be because there are knock-down arguments against the view, either from philosophical argument or from biblical exegesis. No, it really does seem that the issue comes down to the problem of evil, and the idea that Calvinists can't appeal to libertarian free will as (at least an ingredient in) a plausible defense or theodicy in response to the problem. This volume, then, aims to provide a philosophically rigorous discussion of the Calvinist view in light of the problem of evil.

This is a collection of twelve essays that are, for the most part, from the Calvinist perspective. (Though, I stress, *not all* of these essays are from Calvinists. Alexander Pruss's article, for example, certainly is not.) And while the title of the volume is *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil*, most of the articles are about subjects *related* to the problem, but don't address the problem, itself.

That this volume's articles are about subjects related to, but not strictly addressing, the problem of evil, is a point that I think is worth at least thinking about. Recall that this volume aims to fill a particular void in the philosophical-theological literature by giving a voice to defenses of the Calvinist perspective in light of the problem of evil. Most Christian philosophers don't self-identify as Calvinist, and this for reasons having to do with an inability to appeal to libertarian free will as at least an ingredient in any plausible response to the problem of evil. If this is why most Christian philosophers aren't Calvinists, then I think that's a bad reason. Here's why. Consider the two most prominent forms of the problem of evil:

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<sup>1</sup> The authors cite Michael Rea's recent *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) as a prime example.

Logical Problem of Evil: It's impossible for God to exist and for evil to exist. Evil exists; so, God doesn't exist.<sup>2</sup>

Evidential Argument from Evil: There exist instances of intense suffering that God could prevent without thereby losing some greater good, or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. God *would* prevent any instance of intense suffering he could unless he could not do so without thereby losing some greater good, or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. So, God doesn't exist.<sup>3</sup>

Now, free will (type) defenses are principally deployed against only *logical* versions of the problem of evil; that is, against that first type, above. Why can't Calvinists use free will defenses against such a problem? I'm not convinced that Calvinists have to deny the existence of libertarian free will; but, suppose I'm wrong about that. Why does that matter? Suppose a Calvinist thinks humans don't have libertarian free will. Unless she is committed to the view that libertarian free will is *impossible*, I think she can appeal to libertarian free will as at least an ingredient in a defense against the logical problem of evil.

So, I'm not sold that Calvinists need such a defense that is consistent with the truth (if it is true) of Calvinism. Just like anyone else, all the Calvinist needs is a logical possibility to get God off the hook, at least with respect to the logical version of the problem of evil; and surely it's logically possible that humans have libertarian free will.

There is the evidential problem to tackle, however, but I'm not sure that an inability to appeal to libertarian free will matters here, either. The proponent of the evidential argument is essentially wondering: What are the *odds* that all the horrible evils in our world can have a God-justifying reason for their existence? Even if a Christian philosopher were to appeal to libertarian free will in this case, it wouldn't get her very far. So, I conclude that the Calvinist isn't losing very much *at least with respect to her giving up libertarian free will* when it comes to this second, more pressing (in my view), problem of evil.

Having said all that, though, an important tangential question that usually spills out of conversations having to do with the problem of evil (questions concerning moral responsibility), do seem in need of addressing from the Calvinist perspective. And, indeed, a good number of the articles in *Calvinism and the Problem of Evil* attempt to address this issue. That is, they attempt to address the concern that if humans don't have libertarian free will (or, at any rate, that some form of theological determinism is true), then how can it be that humans are held morally responsible for their actions? This is particularly relevant when thinking about a human's

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., J.L. Mackie's "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200-212.

<sup>3</sup> This is William Rowe's famous version from his "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335 – 341. To be clear, this is a probabilistic argument; so, the conclusion shouldn't be thought of as a valid inference from the argument's two premises; rather, the conclusion follows only inductively.

ultimate future (i.e., everlasting peace with God in the new creation, or everlasting separation from the loving presence of God). And, moreover, if some kind of theological determinism is true, then how can it be that *God* isn't the author of (and, so, ultimately responsible for) human evil (i.e., sin)? The vast majority (seven of twelve) of this volume's chapters are aimed at these questions. So, I'd like to reflect, very briefly, on at least a few of these.

Greg Welty, in his chapter, "Molinist Gunslingers: God and the Authorship of Sin," argues that Molinists (that is, philosophers/theologians who think that God's governance of human affairs largely depends on his having so-called 'middle knowledge', knowledge of what creatures *would* do given such and such a circumstance) fare no better than deterministic Calvinists on the charge that God is the author of sin, that is, that God is ultimately responsible for human evil. His argument, it seems to me, hinges on this idea: in both the deterministic Calvinist set up and the Molinist set up, God *makes it the case* what in fact happens. So, suppose that God determined (in whatever way you like) that I write this review. It follows that God has made it the case that, as a matter of fact, I write this review. So, too, on the Molinist view, thinks Welty. It may be that what I *would* do in such and such a circumstance isn't up to God; but, that I *in fact* write this review *is* since God didn't have to create me at all, nor place me in the relevant circumstance(s). So, we should conclude, thinks Welty, that God is equally responsible in both cases.

Welty addresses a number of objections to his argument, but I think there's one missing. Here's the objection: suppose we grant that God is, at least in some sense, responsible for what in fact happens in both the deterministic Calvinist case and the Molinist case. Why should we agree that the sort of responsibility at issue is sufficiently analogous (as Welty is at pains to show)? It seems to me that even if God is responsible in some sense for what I do as a matter of fact on the Molinist view, it's not the same sort of responsibility he'd bear if God were responsible for what I do as a matter of fact on the deterministic view. Here's why: on the Molinist way of viewing things, God only *weakly* actualizes my writing of this review (to borrow language from Alvin Plantinga). On the (deterministic) Calvinist way of viewing things, God *strongly* actualizes my writing this review;<sup>4</sup> that is, God determines every bit of the process of my writing this review; there's nothing *up to me*, in any strong, direct, sense in the process of my writing this review. But, on the Molinist view, that I *would* write this review in such and such a circumstance *is* up to me in a strong and direct sense. Isn't the whole purpose of Plantinga's discussion of weak and strong actualization to make this very point? Humans are directly responsible for what they freely do. God may bear some responsibility, but it's indirect and weak. I think it follows, then, that God's responsibility on the Molinist view is sufficiently different than the (deterministic) Calvinist view, enough to make it the case that the types of responsibility God bears (assuming God bears any) are not sufficiently analogous.

Paul Helm's chapter, "Discrimination: Aspects of God's Causal Activity," examines "the theme of God's causal activity in creating, controlling, and converting, from a Calvinist or Augustinian perspective" (Helm, p. 145). With respect to Helm's

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<sup>4</sup> See Alvin Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), especially pp. 169 – 174.

arguments regarding creating and converting, I have little to say; I mostly agree. The one place I'd like to press is with respect to God's controlling, and in particular God's controlling human behavior, and then *assigning moral responsibility* to humans for their behavior.

In the section of the chapter entitled "Ensurance" (i.e., "the action or means of ensuring or making certain" (Helm, p. 156, n. 16)), Helm argues from the fact that God 'ensures' what we humans do, it doesn't follow that we aren't morally responsible for what we do. His main foil in this section is Katherin Rogers's argument that begins with the following premise:

1. If God causally necessitates your choice, then you are not morally responsible for it.

Helm wonders why any Calvinist should agree with this premise, and he doesn't indicate whether or not Rogers presents any good reason for thinking 1 true. I haven't read Rogers's paper; so, if 1 is given without argument, I think Helm asks a good question. So, here I'll present an argument for 1.

If theological determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of God's decrees. But we are not responsible for what God decrees. Therefore, we are not responsible for the consequences of God's decrees (including our present acts).

This is a parody of Peter van Inwagen's direct argument for incompatibilism spelled out in terms of theological determinism.<sup>5</sup> It depends on two fairly well-known inference rules, rule A and rule B. Rule A says that no one (or, if you like, no mere human) is morally responsible for a necessary truth. Rule B says that if you're not responsible for some fact, P, and you're not responsible for the fact that P implies Q, then you're not responsible for Q either. If the argument is sound, then 1 is true. Which premise doesn't Helm like?

Now, even though I don't think it's obvious that if theological determinism is true, then God is the author of sin (i.e., human evil), I pose the same question I asked of Helm to James Anderson and his paper, "Calvinism and the First Sin." There, James argues that with respect to who bears responsibility for the first instance of human rebellion (humans, or God?), it's not obvious that, once its essential commitments are clarified, Calvinism is in any worse position than any of its most plausible theological competitors. For argument's sake, I'm happy to agree. Perhaps it doesn't follow from the truth of theological determinism that God is the author of sin; but, according to the above parody of the direct argument for incompatibilism, it *does* follow from the truth of theological determinism that *humans* aren't. And if humans aren't, then who is? The only plausible candidate in my view, given the truth of theological determinism, is God. So, out of the frying pan, and into the fryer.

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<sup>5</sup> For van Inwagen's direct argument, see, especially, his *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 184ff.

Finally, let me just raise a quick question to an issue raised by Hugh McCann's paper, "On Grace and Free Will." In his paper, McCann worries that, if it is God's *election* that settles matters with respect to which humans are 'saved' and which aren't, then it's difficult to see how humans can be responsible for accepting or rejecting God's offer of friendship. This, of course, is a classic problem, and McCann spends the last seven or so pages of his paper giving what seems to me a very plausible way of working around the problem, a way that squares a libertarian-like view of freedom with a Calvinist view of God's direct sovereignty over all that happens. Even so, I have the following question. Suppose God saves by grace alone. Why should this worry anyone? Is the idea that if God saves by grace alone, then he can't hold people responsible for their rejecting God because they *couldn't have* chosen to follow God without God's choosing them? I deny this implication. Suppose God chooses some and not others. Why think it follows that those God didn't choose *couldn't have* chosen God? Perhaps it's the case that *everyone* freely rejects God; so, God chooses some against their wills.

Because of space, I'll have to end my comments, here, though much more could be said. In my view, each chapter is worthy of extensive consideration. This volume does what it sets out to do, viz., provide a philosophically rigorous and fair discussion of the Calvinist perspective in light of the problem of evil and its closely related issues.