

# Theism and Ontological Commitment

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(for World Philosophy Day, Queen's University Belfast)

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As many of you are now aware, today is world philosophy day and there are activities going on across the globe:

- theatrical performances of Plato's allegory of the cave in Germany and Italy
- a conference entitled "Philosophy, Cultural Diversity and Rapprochement of Cultures" at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France
- a public lecture on the impact of Islamic philosophy in the west to be given in Tehran
- a philosophical festival in Russia
- public billboards dedicated to philosophy in El Salvador
- World Philosophy Day was officially being hosted by Iran, where because of involvement by the Iranian government, there has already been the focus of public discourse about totalitarianism, human rights, and political freedom. As a result of worries over political oppression and censorship by the Iranian government, less than two weeks ago UNESCO cancelled the events in Iran and moved them to Paris.

I am extremely pleased to be able to be a part of these activities, even if on a small scale, and in particular want to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Watkins and the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy here at Queen's University, Belfast for extending an invitation to speak to you all today.

As you have no doubt already guessed, I'm an American. I teach at a small liberal arts institution in the state of Idaho. I'm fortunate to be on a research fellowship at Oxford University this academic year. The goal of the fellowship, which is generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation, is to "promote extended international exchange" and I'm using my time here to hopefully complete another book on free will, a topic that has been one of the foci of my research to date, and a topic to which I'll return in a bit. But I want to begin talking about ontology, which one leading philosopher has defined as "a name for the science of being as such."<sup>1</sup> This part of philosophy might sound more esoteric than it really is. If one were to make a list of all the kinds of things you think exist—not only specific kinds of things like cats and dogs and buildings, but also more general kinds of things like material objects,

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<sup>1</sup> van Inwagen, Peter, "Metaphysics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/metaphysics/>>

properties, numbers—one would be giving her ontology. In a wonderful passage, the influential philosopher Willard van Orman Quine describes ontology as follows:

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllable: “What is there?” It can be answered, moreover, in a word – “Everything”—and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is. There remains room for disagreement over cases; and so the issue has stayed alive down the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Quine goes on to describe the disagreement between two philosophers over what kinds of entities exist; this is a disagreement over ontological commitment. A person’s ontological commitment is just those general kinds of things that a person thinks exist, or which a person’s view commit her to thinking exist whether or not she explicitly realizes it. More specifically, today I want to talk about the difference in ontological commitment between what are perhaps the two most influential and widespread “contestants in the contemporary Western intellectual world”<sup>3</sup>—not only among academic philosophers, but also among people more general. These are naturalism and theism.

I’ll begin with naturalism. Naturalism is a view that most of you will probably be quite familiar with, even if you’re not familiar with the title.

From this perspective, there is no God and human beings are properly seen as parts of nature. The way to understand what is most distinctive about us, our ability to love, to act, to think, to use language, our humor and playacting, our art, philosophy, literature, history, our morality, our religion, our tendency to enlist in sometimes unlikely causes and devote our lives to them--the fundamental way to understand all this is in terms of our community with (nonhuman) nature. We are best seen as parts of nature and are to be understood in terms of our place in the natural world.<sup>4</sup>

Naturalism is a widely popular view, particularly among academic philosophers, but also among a growing number of individuals in the increasingly secular world. It is the view of those who have come to be called the New Atheists: philosopher Daniel Dennett, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and neuroscientist Sam Harris. (I should probably also mention writer Christopher Hitchens, though I couldn’t find as good of a picture with all four of them.) Their book about naturalism, and against religion—*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, *The God Delusion*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*—are best sellers. Judging from their titles, you can probably guess their take on theism, even if you’re not already familiar with their work.

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<sup>2</sup> W. V. O Quine, "On What There Is," *The Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948): 21.

<sup>3</sup> Plantinga, “Augustinian Christian Philosophy” [NEED REST OF CITATION]. Plantinga also mentions a third contestant, creative antirealism, which I’ll ignore in the present context.

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga, “Augustinian Christian Philosophy” [NEED REST OF CITATION].

In a recent and insightful book, Michael Rea—who teaches at the University of Notre Dame—has argued against naturalism. His argument can be seen to have two main channels. First, he argues that “there is an important sense in which naturalism’s status as orthodoxy is without rational foundation.”<sup>5</sup> Naturalism, according to Rea, is not a philosophical thesis but a research program which “consists of a disposition (or set of dispositions) to treat the methods of science and those methods alone as basic sources of evidence.”<sup>6</sup> Though naturalism comes in many varieties, “most naturalists would affirm Wilfrid Sellars’s slogan that ‘science is the measure of all things: of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not’ (Sellars 1963: 173).”<sup>7</sup> Naturalism, Rea thinks not only “dominates the Western academy” but is also “at least widely perceived to be intrinsically hostile to belief in God.”<sup>8</sup> Naturalism differs from theism, or what he calls supernaturalism<sup>9</sup>, in that the latter allows for additional basic sources of evidence besides science. Note here that Rea is *not* arguing that theism entails or even implies that science is not or should not be taken to be a basic source of evidence about reality; it only means that it shouldn’t be taken to be the *only* source of such evidence. Second, he argues that naturalism is in fact incompatible with many of the ontological and metaphysical commitments that naturalists want to hold. One example is that “the methods of science alone provide no justification for accepting realism about material objects (RMO)—the thesis that there exist material objects with intrinsic modal properties.”<sup>10</sup> Other examples include an implicit and unwanted commitment to mind-body dualism, skepticism about the existence of other minds, and an incompatibility with moral reason—the view that there are objective moral facts—which many naturalists want to endorse.<sup>11</sup> I mention these criticisms, not necessarily to endorse them, but rather to show that even if naturalism is the prevailing view among philosophers, it is not so uncontroversially.

You are all surely familiar with theism. The great Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne provides a basic definition of theism as “the claim that there is a God, understood in the way that Western religion (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) has generally understood the claim.”<sup>12</sup> For Swinburne, this includes not only that a God exists, but that God is a person capable of intentional action, who is omniscient, omnipotent, acts in history, etc.... For present purposes, however, I want to work with as

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<sup>5</sup> Michael C. Rea, “Naturalism and Ontology: A Reply to Jacquette,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (2005): 343.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>7</sup> Michael C. Rea, “Naturalism and Moral Realism” [NEED REST OF CITATION].

<sup>8</sup> Rea: 356.

<sup>9</sup> Technically, Rea thinks that theism and supernaturalism are distinct; see *ibid.*, 356. However, for present purposes, I think we can ignore this distinction while recognizing that it is important in the context of Rea’s book.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>11</sup> See his “Naturalism and Moral Realism” (NEED REST OF CITATION).

<sup>12</sup> *Is There a God*, 5. [NEED REST OF CITATION]

this a definition of theism as possible; as such, I'll leave aside many of these further attributes of God. May theistic philosophers have engaged in an enterprise called natural theology. This name, I think, can be misleading, for it sounds like what is being done is a kind of theology, not philosophy. But this isn't the case, as shown by the following description of natural theology by William Alston:

*Natural theology* is the enterprise of providing support for religious belief by starting with premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious belief. We begin from the mere existence of the world, or the teleological order of the world, or the concept of God, and we try to show that when we think through the implications of our starting point we are led to recognize the existence of a being that possesses attributes sufficient to identify Him as God.<sup>13</sup>

Now, not all theistically minded philosophers are engaged in the practice of natural theology. And while the New Atheists are rather disdainful of the enterprise, there are other naturalistically minded philosophers who take natural theology quite seriously. William Rowe, is one such example; though himself an atheist (primarily for reasons having to do with the problem of evil), Rowe defends a view which he calls 'friendly atheism', according to which "some theists are rationally justified in holding to theism" even if there are sufficient grounds for one to rationally deny the non-existence of God.<sup>14</sup>

So to return to ontological commitment, an obvious point of ontological disagreement between naturalists and theists is whether or not God exists, as well as the related issue of whether or not it is rational to believe that God exists. Naturalists do not believe that God is among the set of things included in the correct ontology, whereas theists think that an ontology that doesn't include God is incomplete. It is here that the traditional arguments for the existence of God—the cosmological, ontological, teleological, moral arguments, etc...—and the arguments against the existence of God—the problem of evil, the problem of hiddenness, etc...—get their traction. But instead of looking at this ontological disagreement between naturalists and theists, I want to instead look at a different issue, one that I mentioned earlier, and that is free will. Now, before I can connect free will to ontological commitment, I need to do some groundwork. And that groundwork consists largely in laying out some of the major terms and positions with regard to the philosophical discussion of free will.

- moral responsibility—deserving of moral blame or praise for what you've done
- free will (control condition on moral responsibility)—the kind of control over one's actions needed to be morally responsible

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<sup>13</sup> William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 298.

<sup>14</sup> William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *Arguing About Religion*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2009), 252.

- epistemic condition on moral responsibility—the kind of knowledge or beliefs one needs in order to be morally responsible
- determinism (both causal and theological)
- compatibilism—it is possible to be free even if determinism were true
- incompatibilism—it is not possible to be free if determinism were true
- libertarianism—incompatibilism plus there is free will (so determinism is false)
- free will skepticism—the denial of the existence of free will

So, both libertarians and those compatibilists who believe in free will differ from free will skeptics in terms of their ontological commitments.

Libertarian views are often accused of being beholden to the discoveries of science, insofar as they require there to be indeterminism in the world. And since not all kinds of indeterminism would be relevant for free will, it also requires the indeterminism to be located at specific places (where, exactly, it is required will vary from one libertarian view to another). In contrast, most contemporary forms of compatibilism hold that free will can exist whether determinism is true or false. (That is, why they hold that the existence of free will is compatible with the truth of determinism, they do not require the truth of determinism.) And this is often taken to be an advantage of compatibilism over incompatibilism.

Here is how John Martin Fischer, a leading compatibilist, makes the point:

I could certainly imagine waking up some morning to the newspaper headline, “Causal Determinism Is True!” (Most likely this would not be in the *National Enquirer* or even *People* –but perhaps the *New York Times*...) I could imagine reading the article and subsequently (presumably over some time) becoming convinced that causal determinism is true –that the generalizations that describe the relationships between complexes of past events and laws of nature, on the one hand, and subsequent events, on the other, are universal generalizations with 100 percent probabilities associated with them. And I feel confident that this would not, nor should it, change my view of myself and others as (sometimes) free and robustly morally responsible agents.... A compatibilist need not give up this assumption [that we are at least sometimes free and morally responsible], even if he were to wake up to the headline, “Causal Determinism is True!” (and if he were convinced of its truth).<sup>15</sup>

Fischer takes it to be a strength of compatibilism that it is resilient with respect to the truth (or falsity) of determinism because that view, unlike libertarianism, does not require there to be indeterminism at very specific places. All else being equal, it does seem preferable to have our beliefs –especially such a

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<sup>15</sup> John Martin Fischer, "Compatibilism," in *Four Views on Free Will*, ed. John Martin Fischer et al. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 44-47.

central belief as that we are morally responsible agents—be resilient in this way. So this is one place in which libertarians have ontological commitments that are greater than they are for compatibilists.

However, there is another difference that one finds if one looks below the surface a bit further.

Manuel Vargas has brought explicit attention to this issue in a recent paper:

There is nearly always an unremarked upon elephant that lurks in rooms where philosophers discuss free will. In this instance, the elephant may be more difficult to ignore. The elephant is the role of religion in motivating and sustaining various libertarian accounts. It would, I think, be revealing to do a survey of the religious beliefs of contemporary libertarians and compatibilists. My guess is that we would learn that a disproportionate number—perhaps even most—libertarians [in the philosophical community] are religious and, especially, Christian. I suspect that we would also learn that the overwhelming majority of compatibilists are atheist or agnostic... [I] think that understanding the difference religion can make may be a key to understanding some important methodological differences between religious libertarians and their interlocutor. Though one might be a libertarian who is religious [...], a religious libertarian in my sense is one who, antecedent to and perhaps independent of philosophical inquiry, is committed to a strong belief in a particular divine moral order that requires a strong notion of human freedom. In the doxastic economy of the religious libertarian, libertarianism is inextricably tied to a religious framework.<sup>16</sup>

Now, recently some philosophers have done the sort of survey that Vargas speculates about here. As part of their PhilPapers online repository of philosophy scholarship, David Bourget and David Chalmers conducted a “survey as an information-gathering exercise concerning the distribution of philosophical views within the philosophical profession.”<sup>17</sup> The survey, completed in November of last year, was taken by 1803 philosophy faculty members and/or PhDs and 829 philosophy graduate students. Of these respondents, 1495 were primarily affiliated with the US and 417 with the UK. Now the survey isn’t a scientific sample, as (among other shortcomings) it’s definitely skewed toward English-speaking philosophy departments: 60 US departments, 18 UK departments, 7 Canadian departments, 5 Australasian departments, and 6 departments from non-UK Europe. But it still provides some interesting insights into the pulse of the philosophical community. Here are a few of the 20 or so questions asked:

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<sup>16</sup> Manuel Vargas, "Libertarianism and Skepticism About Free Will: Some Arguments against Both," *Philosophical Topics* 32, no. (2004): 408.

<sup>17</sup> <http://philpapers.org/raw/survey.pdf>

### Question

#### Meta-ethics: moral realism or moral anti-realism?

- Accept: moral realism
- Lean toward: moral realism
- Accept: moral anti-realism
- Lean toward: moral anti-realism
- Other

(Click to select an option) ▼

Comment (optional):

### Question

#### Free will: incompatibilism or compatibilism?

- Accept: incompatibilism
- Lean toward: incompatibilism
- Accept: compatibilism
- Lean toward: compatibilism
- Other

(Click to select an option) ▼

Comment (optional):

Here are the results of the survey questions regarding the nature of free will and the existence of God:

#### Free will: compatibilism, libertarianism, or no free will?

|                                       |                   |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Accept or lean toward: compatibilism  | 550 / 931 (59%)   |
| Other                                 | 139 / 931 (14.9%) |
| Accept or lean toward: libertarianism | 128 / 931 (13.7%) |
| Accept or lean toward: no free will   | 114 / 931 (12.2%) |

#### God: theism or atheism?

|                                |                   |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|
| Accept or lean toward: atheism | 678 / 931 (72.8%) |
| Accept or lean toward: theism  | 136 / 931 (14.6%) |
| Other                          | 117 / 931 (12.5%) |

Just a few weeks ago, Bourget and Chalmers released correlations further analysis of the correlations between answers.<sup>18</sup> And here one finds some very interesting results. For instance, philosophers in the United States are more likely to be libertarians than are their non-American colleagues:

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<sup>18</sup> More specifically, these correlations are among the faculty who responded to the survey, and not the graduate students.

| <u>Free will:libertarianism</u>    |                |                    | 0.07 |
|------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|------|
|                                    | libertarianism | not libertarianism |      |
| United States                      | 15.9% (89/557) | 70.7% (394/557)    |      |
| not United States                  | 11% (39/352)   | 76.7% (270/352)    |      |
| Response pairs: 909 p-value: 0.034 |                |                    |      |

And perhaps most interesting is the data on correlations between various positions embraced by the respondents. Among the highest correlations between positions is a correlation coefficient of .396 between theism and libertarianism, showing a pretty significant connection between being a theist and being a libertarian. One can also see the connections here by looking at the following breakdowns of the data. First, theists are significantly more likely to be libertarians than are atheists, and atheists are significantly more likely to be compatibilists than are theists:

| <u>God:theism</u>                    |                |                 | 0.396 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------|
|                                      | theism         | atheism         |       |
| libertarianism                       | 50.7% (65/128) | 39.8% (51/128)  |       |
| not libertarianism                   | 8.7% (57/655)  | 81.9% (537/655) |       |
| Response pairs: 898 p-value: < 0.001 |                |                 |       |

| <u>God:atheism</u>                   |                 |                | 0.294 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------|
|                                      | atheism         | theism         |       |
| compatibilism                        | 81.9% (444/542) | 8.4% (46/542)  |       |
| not compatibilism                    | 59.7% (144/241) | 31.5% (76/241) |       |
| Response pairs: 898 p-value: < 0.001 |                 |                |       |

But note that the correlations here are not 1. Nearly 40% of libertarians are atheists; and though less common, there are theists who are compatibilists. So the connection between theism and the belief in libertarian free will shouldn't be overstated; but the correlation does call out for an explanation.

In an issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, which is arguably the best English-language philosophy of religion journal, 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."<sup>19</sup> 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

<sup>19</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians: An Augustinian Challenge," *Faith and Philosophy* 20, no. (2003): 460.

to certain philosophical problems for Christians very easy.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> This second point is surely right; for, though there is some degree of interpretive controversy regarding more than one of these figures, arguably Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—to name just four—were compatibilists.

One of the leading reasons for many theists to embrace libertarianism is surely the mileage it secures in responding to the problem of evil. Well, to be more precise, there is not a single problem of evil, but a whole range of issues that fall under this title. Most generally, what goes by the label ‘the problem of evil’ are a number of arguments which aim to show that God doesn’t exist, or that it’s irrational to believe that He does, on the basis of evil. The strongest of these is more properly referred to as the logical problem of evil. Here is J. L. Mackie’s informal presentation of the logical problem of evil:

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.<sup>22</sup>

But if the libertarian is correct that there is free will and that free agents cannot, as a matter of logical necessity, be determined to act as they do, then so long as God has a sufficient reason for creating creatures with free will, then the logical problem of evil fails. For if humans have libertarian free will, then God cannot create a world containing such agents and unilaterally guarantee that that world contains no evil. Compatibilists, on the other hand, cannot so easily make the claim that God cannot create a world containing free agents and unilaterally guarantee that that world contains no evil. For God could create free agents and simply determine them not to commit evil. Now, as Baker has noted in the article I mentioned earlier, it’s not as if the truth of libertarianism would solve all the other

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 461.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 462.

<sup>22</sup> J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” in *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 92ff.

versions of the problem of evil. She 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.”<sup>23</sup> I concede that the mere truth of libertarianism 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, as mentioned a moment ago, has changed what many in contemporary philosophy of religion take the problem of evil to be. And the revival of the free will defense in the 1970s and 80s by a number of leading philosophers of religion is not unrelated to the fact that the vast majority of these philosophers were also libertarians. It’s probably also not surprising that one of the most historically influential presentations of the free will defense was made by Augustine, who (though this is contentious among Augustine interpreters) also perhaps developed the first explicitly libertarian account of free will.

But I strongly doubt that the correlation between theism and libertarianism is completely explained by the problem of evil. It would be preferable, from the libertarian’s point of view, if there were a satisfactory compatibilist response to the problem of evil which the libertarian could also utilize. Likely also doing work here is the theist’s commitment to non-naturalism. Insofar as she’s a theist, she already believes that there exist things that are not part of the natural world that the sciences investigate. God is simply not the kind of thing that falls under the scope of science’s purview, but is (presumably) an intentional and free agent. And if, as the leading monotheism’s hold, humans are created in the image of God, it is not a far step to seeing humans as similar kinds of agents, ones who are not entirely constrained by the laws of nature and the past state of the physical world. That something like this is going on receives support from an even higher correlation among philosophers who are both theists and non-physicalists about the mind:

**Correlations between main answers and main answers**

| Answer A                             | Answer B                                 | Correlation coefficient |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| <a href="#">Mind:non-physicalism</a> | <a href="#">Free will:libertarianism</a> | 0.401                   |
| <a href="#">Mind:physicalism</a>     | <a href="#">God:atheism</a>              | 0.399                   |
| <a href="#">God:theism</a>           | <a href="#">Free will:libertarianism</a> | 0.396                   |

The question regarding the mind is, in the survey, ambiguous between physicalism about the human mind and physicalism about all minds, and theism—at least of any traditional sort—is committed to non-physicalism at least with respect to one mind: the divine mind. But if one already believes in the existence of at least one non-physical or immaterial mind, then one cannot reject the possibility of

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<sup>23</sup> Baker: 471.

immaterial minds. So it is perhaps not surprising that many theists also have an ontological commitment to non-physical minds—immaterial souls, if you will—in addition to God whereas naturalists will likely reject the former just as they reject the latter. Of course, nothing in theism commits one to either, as I mentioned before, libertarian free will or to non-physicalism with respect to human minds. The exact relationship between these views is certainly interesting, but a further exploration of them will have to await another day.

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