

BOOK REVIEWS

Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil, by Guillaume Bignon. Pickwick Publications, 2018. Pp. xi + 241. \$51.00 (hardcover) and \$31.00 (paperback).

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As the title suggests, Guillaume Bignon's *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* targets two objections to Calvinism (more on exactly what "Calvinism" amounts to in a minute). The first holds that Calvinism undermines human responsibility and free will; according to the second, Calvinism undermines God's moral perfection and makes him the author of sin. Bignon aims to show that Calvinism is not, in fact, susceptible to these objections.

Bignon restricts his use of the term "Calvinism" to refer to "*Calvinist determinism*," which he takes to be the claim that "everything that comes to pass is *determined*, or *necessitated* by prior conditions, . . . [specifically,] God's providential degree and the full scope of his supernatural activity, whatever shape one thinks that may take" (4–5). One might wonder about this definitional stipulation, however clear. First, this definition of Calvinism is compatible with the truth of various forms of universalism, including what I've referred to elsewhere as "necessary universalism," which "claims that it is a necessary truth that none are eternally damned" (Kevin Timpe, *Arguing about Religion* [Routledge, 2009], 433). Allowing such a view to count as Calvinism is strange, particularly given Bignon's reliance on the Westminster Confession of Faith. Second, there are theologians who self-identify as Calvinists but who wouldn't satisfy Bignon's definition (e.g., Oliver Crisp, whom Bignon mentions in n. 14 (7), as well as the historical figures discussed in *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology*, edited by Willem J. van Asselt, J. Martin Bac, and Roelf T. te Velde [Baker Academic, 2010]). Finally, Calvinist determinism so defined doesn't entail theological compatibilism (that is, the view that human moral responsibility is compatible with the truth of theological determinism). And it's clear from the book as a whole



that Bignon's Calvinism is intended to include both theological compatibilism and theological determinism.

Excusing Sinners and Blaming God is divided into two unequal sections. The first section (152 pages) focuses on arguments that Calvinism entails no human freedom or responsibility (i.e., "excusing sinners"), while the second section (61 pages) responds to arguments that the truth of Calvinism would entail that God is morally suspect (i.e., "blaming God").

Part I canvasses a number of versions of "excusing sinners" arguments against compatibilism. The vast majority of this section of the book engages philosophical and not theological material. Some of the versions of the "excusing sinners" argument are such that I've not seen them suggested in the literature, e.g.: "puppets are determined; puppets are not morally responsible; humans are determined; therefore humans are not morally responsible" (17). It's perplexing to me that Bignon would think he needs to argue against arguments of this sort.

The discussion of other "excusing sinners" arguments trades on how compatibilists and incompatibilists differ with respect to understanding various terms. For instance, "the coercion argument" (chap. 2) is summarized as follows (keeping Bignon's numbering):

12. If determinism is true, then all human choices are coerced.
13. If a person's choice is coerced, then that person cannot be morally responsible for it.

Therefore,

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

Which is to say

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

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

A stronger response to the coercion argument is Bignon's attempt to show that coercion is relevantly different from theological determinism. Bignon writes that "for a choice to be free such that its maker is morally responsible, it need not be undetermined, but it does need to be determined (assuming determinism is true) by the agent's *own* desires, which flow from the agent's God-given character and inclinations" (37). Here,

he presses what is referred to as a “soft-line response” to manipulation arguments, since he thinks that manipulation but not determinism undermines moral responsibility. Indeed, Bignon claims that the manipulation arguments offered by Derk Pereboom (the four-case argument), Alfred Mele (the zygote argument), Robert Kane (the “Walden Two” argument), and Katherin Rogers (the “divine controller” argument) all fail precisely because the relevant difference between manipulation and determinism is this *God-given-ness*. However, notice that if theological determinism is true, all cases of manipulation are ultimately God-given. What one would want, and what one doesn’t find, is an account of why responsibility despite *God-given-ness* is compatible with God’s directly causing an agent to choose, but incompatible with the *God-given-ness* that goes through any human agent (that is, a manipulator). Bignon’s response to various other manipulation arguments (chap. 3) proceeds along similar lines.

The book picks up steam later in Section 1, particularly in chapters 5 and 6. These chapters are much denser, and much more careful, than the early chapters. It’s here that Bignon’s case is strongest. Chapter 5, still more philosophical than theological, is on van Inwagen’s consequence argument, which he thinks depends for its purported success either on begging the question or on contested issues related to “ability” and “the ability to do otherwise” (67). Bignon often doesn’t exercise proper caution in understanding van Inwagen, as when he thinks that “having a choice about whether *p* is true” can only be understood as involving libertarianism (see Peter van Inwagen, “How to Think about the Problem of Free Will,” *The Journal of Ethics* 12 [2008]: 327–341) or when Bignon suggests that what van Inwagen “has in view is *libertarian* free will” (63), a phrase that van Inwagen abhors. While there is recent work on the consequence argument that Bignon doesn’t engage, he raises some important challenges for those incompatibilists who employ the consequence and similar arguments.

In this context, Bignon defends a conditional analysis of the ability to do otherwise. He differentiates between a categorical ability, expressed in PAP_{All} and a conditional ability, expressed in PAP_{If} .

PAP_{All} : a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if, *all things inside and outside the person being just as they are at the moment of choice*, he could have done otherwise.

PAP_{If} : a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise, had his inner desires inclined him to do so at the moment of choice. (72)

As a theological compatibilist and determinist who believes that humans are at least sometimes morally responsible, Bignon claims that PAP_{All} is false while PAP_{If} is true. But the truth of PAP_{If} is compatible with theological determinism. “To say that a person has a choice understood conditionally is precisely to say that the person could choose otherwise, *if only* something (like his inner desires) had been different. . . . The only

analysis of choice that has so far been shown (and admitted) to be necessary for moral responsibility” (84–85) is the conditional ability. And the various examples that are intended to show PAP_{All} not only fail to demonstrate its truth, but “only reaffirm a PAP_{If} ” (75). Bignon argues that PAP_{If} was never supposed to be about what is sufficient for moral responsibility, only necessary (96). While this is true, without knowing the other conditions on moral responsibility, it’s hard to evaluate whether his defense of the conditional analysis is ultimately successful. Nevertheless, chapter 5’s discussion of conditional analyses and classical compatibilism is one of the most interesting I’ve seen in recent literature.

In the last chapter of Part I, Bignon seeks to show not only that the various arguments canvassed earlier don’t refute compatibilism, but that there are arguments that move us “beyond mere skepticism” (99) to the truth of compatibilism. The argument proceeds as follows. Bignon thinks that libertarianism requires the truth of PAP_{All} and that there are theological reasons for rejecting it (more on these reasons below). Therefore, libertarianism is false. (Notice that this argument would at most show that theological compatibilism is true, but not that theological determinism is also true. So at most Part I shows not that Calvinist determinism is true, but that its truth wouldn’t mean that humans aren’t morally responsible.) However, dialectically, since Bignon is pushing back against two arguments against Calvinism that both affirm the existence of evil, the assumption that humans are free and responsible, given that they’re sinful, is understandable.

Why think that PAP_{All} is false? Bignon thinks that Frankfurt-style considerations are unsuccessful. Instead, he develops two independent arguments. First, PAP_{All} is “refuted by the coherence of a God who is both impeccable and praiseworthy and hence [shows] that one can be praiseworthy without the categorial ability to do otherwise” (164). Second, Bignon argues that accepting PAP_{All} either leads to Pelagianism (since for any series of choices, a human could have chosen a non-sinful option at each step) or universalism (since humans can’t avoid all sinful choices, but thus are not blameworthy for them).

It’s not clear to me that these arguments are especially problematic for the libertarian. The libertarian could hold, for instance, that God’s moral perfection is compatible both with his decision to create and not to create, and thus there are at least some categorial abilities that even God has. God’s impeccability, the impossibility “for God to do anything but that which is righteous” (105), doesn’t rule out that God has the ability to do otherwise. Similarly, libertarians can give accounts of divine freedom that don’t rule out divine praiseworthiness (my “The Best Thing in Life is Free: The Compatibility of Divine Freedom and God’s Essential Moral Perfection,” in *Free Will and Classical Theism*, ed. Hugh McCann [Oxford University Press, 2016], 133–151, is just one instance). Bignon thinks that divine freedom shows the ability to do otherwise isn’t required for moral responsibility:

31. God always chooses and acts righteously, and lacks the categorical ability to do otherwise than acting righteously.
32. God is always morally praiseworthy, that is, he is morally responsible, for his righteous choices and actions.

Therefore

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

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

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

And there are incompatibilist views of freedom (both human and divine) that are compatible with 33*, despite Bignon's argument against "levels of granularity for actions" (110–116). So I don't see that this argument need worry the incompatibilist. Moreover, Bignon is wrong to claim this sort of response (which he rightly attributes to me) "concedes" (132) that moral responsibility is compatible with determinism given that it holds responsibility is compatible with one's moral character ruling out sinful actions). As Bignon notes earlier "determinism is [the view] that *everything* that comes to pass is determined" (4, emphasis added). My view certainly does not involve thinking that determinism so understood is compatible with moral responsibility.

Likewise, Bignon's *reductio* fails. For one, while I think the libertarian should reject what I referred to as necessary universalism above, that horn of the *reductio* would need to show that even contingent universalism (the view that as a matter of fact all are redeemed) is false. But Bignon can't do this without engaging the soteriological doctrines that he set aside in chapter 1. The other horn, namely the charge of Pelagianism, can also be avoided. As Bignon constructs it, the truth of PAP_{All} would entail that a human can do a morally good action simply on the basis of works and without the grace of God. But this would only be true if a lack of grace is part of the outside factors that we hold fixed, and the libertarian need not (and, I think, ought not) grant this. Bignon could argue that such grace is not given in each case, but again this move would require engaging the soteriological doctrines that he sets aside.

Section II focuses on the problem of evil faced by theological determinists: "It is alleged that if determinism is true, if free will is not libertarian, then humans are not morally responsible for their sin, and therefore, God is—which is presumably unacceptable" (167). Bignon begins by noting that the existence of free will as the libertarian understands it is neither necessary nor sufficient for responding to the logical problem of evil. Why is it not necessary? Here Bignon appeals to skeptical theism, though not by name:

If the skeptic wasn't to use the existence of evil to disprove the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God, then he needs to carry the heavy burden of proof of showing that it is not possible for God to have morally sufficient reasons to allow evil. But how will he do that? Unless and until that happens, Calvinists and Arminians can maintain that God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil [even if they don't know what they are]. (171)

And "no Calvinist in his right mind should presume to know for a fact what specific good reason God has for permitting" evils (174).

Why would libertarianism not be sufficient for responding to the problem of evil? Because there are evils in the world that are not justified on the basis of libertarian conceptions of free will. (Somewhat surprising, Bignon grants in passing that Calvinism is worse than Arminianism with respect to the problem of evil since there are evils that "God could have brought about with less suffering on Calvinism, since God could have controlled the inner workings of the heart more successfully" [175].)

Bignon claims the argument schema to get from Calvinism to God's authorship of sin is the following:

(Premise 1)—Calvinism entails [Proposition p about divine involvement in evil].

(Premise 2)—But in fact, [Proposition p] is false.

(Conclusion)—Therefore Calvinism is false. (178–179)

There are three ways to instantiate this argument schema, which Bignon refers to as "foggy," "ambitious," and "timid." Foggy versions of the argument replace p with a claim such as "God is the author of sin." But these versions are foggy precisely because we're not told enough about what precisely the claim means:

When one digs deeper into the possible meaning of 'author of sin,' what emerges is that objectors take issue with the Calvinist God for standing behind evil. . . . One can complain *that* the Calvinist God brings about evil, or one can complain *how* he does. The ambitious recipe does the former, the timid does the latter. (180)

If the charge is simply *that* God brings about evil, the objection is ambitious in that it would cut against all forms of traditional Christianity, Arminian as well as Calvinist. In the last chapter, Bignon argues that a timid attempt involves "properly identifying a unique feature of Calvinism but begs the question by its failure to establish that this property is in fact problematic" (190). It's this section of the book that I think theologians will find most engaging.

Bignon notes on the last page of Part I that the arguments therein show at most that theological compatibilism is true, but not that theological determinism is also true. So at most Part I shows that if Calvinist determinism were true, human moral responsibility wouldn't be ruled out. The arguments of Part II don't show that theological determinism is true either; rather, they show that if Calvinist determinism is true, it does not follow

that God is morally blameworthy for causing evil. In this sense, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God* is a defensive book. What reasons are there for thinking theological determinism is true? Bignon mentions both biblical grounds and philosophical grounds (229). The biblical issues aren't discussed at great length, and when they are, I think the treatment is overly confident (see, e.g., 176–177). The philosophical grounds all proceed from objections to libertarianism. And, as Bignon notes elsewhere, the falsity of libertarianism doesn't entail theological determinism.

It's not always clear what primary audience Bignon's book is intended for. The level of rigor and care in discussing distinctions and different versions of arguments often suggests its primary audience is professional philosophers. But at other times it considers versions of arguments or claims that one simply doesn't—and shouldn't—find in the philosophical literature. Here see, for instance, the discussion of whether determinism necessarily entails manipulation in chapter 3 or the discussion in chapter 4 of whether determinism entails mental illness. At times, Bignon's definitions and treatment of historical issues are perplexing, especially if he intends theologians and not just philosophers to be among his audience. As an instance here, see the claim that "all theologians who affirm libertarian free will" are "Arminians" (10). I suspect Anselm, for instance, would be surprised to learn that he is Arminian. One final criticism: the press that puts out a book such as this fails if does not require it to have an index.

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