



ANTHONY C. THISELTON

# Approaching Philosophy *of* Religion

*An Introduction to  
Key Thinkers, Concepts,  
Methods & Debates*

*InterVarsity Press*  
P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426  
ivpress.com  
email@ivpress.com

US Edition © 2018 by Anthony Thiselton  
UK Edition © 2017 by Anthony Thiselton

Published in the United States of America by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, by permission of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from InterVarsity Press.

InterVarsity Press® is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA®, a movement of students and faculty active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges, and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, visit [intervarsity.org](http://intervarsity.org).

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design: David Fassett

Images: garden of eden: Expulsion from Paradise by Giovanni di Paolo di Grazia at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA / Bridgeman Images

Christ mosaic: © aytacicer/iStockphoto

cloudy sky: © stoonn/iStockphoto

ISBN 978-0-8308-5206-2 (print)

ISBN 978-0-8308-8731-6 (digital)

Printed in the United States of America ∞

InterVarsity Press is committed to ecological stewardship and to the conservation of natural resources in all our operations. This book was printed using sustainably sourced paper.

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

---

P	24	23	22	21	20	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Y	38	37	36	35	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	18			



## Free will

To possess free will generally denotes the capacity to act without external compulsion or coercion. But constraints on possible actions may result from internal compulsions of habit, or, mainly for theists, of grace or law. Normally people will accept responsibility for an action only if they believe that they could have acted otherwise. Yet in philosophy this may run up against the problem of determinism, and in theology or religion, the part played by sin and grace in the tradition of Augustine and Calvin. Freedom of choice and lack of coercion play a huge part in philosophy and politics, especially with the rise of individualism in the West and the emergence of liberalism. J. S. Mill (1806–73) provided the classic expression of individual English liberalism in his *On Liberty* (1859). He argued for maximum liberty in society, alongside representative government and better education.

Philosophical debates about free will become complex and sophisticated. At one extreme 'the liberty of indifference' suggests that a human agent is entirely free to choose various courses of action, provided there are no constraints imposed by governments or people in authority. A more moderate view is held by 'compatibilists', who argue that every individual has sufficient freedom of choice and action to give currency to moral responsibility, but do not exclude every kind of determinism. Aquinas explains, 'Man has free choice, or otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands... would be in vain.'<sup>85</sup> A number of theologians start elsewhere. They do not regard free will as freedom *from* constraint, but as freedom *for* the expression of one's character.

The issue has been as controversial in the history of philosophical theology as it has been in the history of philosophy. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 254) interpreted the 'fall of Adam' in Genesis as largely allegorical. He wrote, 'Every rational creature is capable of earning praise and censure.'<sup>86</sup> His bold assertion of free will was largely prompted by his opposition to Gnostic notions of determinism. In this respect he has even been called 'the father of Pelagianism.'<sup>87</sup> Pelagius (c. 355–420) also insisted on the reality of moral struggle. Human nature, he argued, stands in a position of equilibrium, to choose good or evil. He vigorously

attacked Augustine's dictum 'Command what you will, and grant [by the power of grace] what you command.'<sup>88</sup> Both Origen and Pelagius appealed to the moral responsibility of human beings, arguing that conscience and guilt were misplaced, if human beings did not have free will. Augustine recognized the concern of Pelagius for goodness and holiness, calling Pelagius 'a holy man, who had made no small progress in the Christian life.'<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, Augustine (354–430), perhaps the most influential church father in the West, believed that Pelagius' 'equilibrium' was lost at the 'fall'. One of his stronger arguments is from the apostle Paul's clear teaching on the inadequacies of the Jewish law. The law, he said, could not assist moral effort, but provoked sin. Sin and grace have both abounded (Rom. 5.20–21). If a person could live righteously by obeying the law, he argued, 'faith in Christ' and the power of grace would have become unnecessary.<sup>90</sup> This was a different conception of freedom from that which separated Augustine and Pelagius. In Pelagius it was freedom to choose without external constraint, as it is for many philosophers. In Augustine it was freedom to express one's character without external constraint. In this case, he argued, an unredeemed character can choose only what falls short of God's righteous standards; but human beings who have been created anew by grace are free to choose according to the new nature, by the power of grace.

This controversy, albeit in modified forms, continues in theology today. John Calvin (1509–64) argued, like Augustine, that if everything good comes from God, human beings cannot choose the good in their own strength. Similarly Luther (1483–1546) wrote *The Bondage of the Will* (1525) in response to Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), who emphasized the importance of free will. Erasmus was a fair-minded scholar, who supported the basic aims of the Reformation, but attacked Luther for going too far in his undervaluing of free will. Indeed the Protestant theologian James Arminius (1560–1609) whole-heartedly endorsed Reformation theology, but rejected the alleged determinism of Calvinism, embracing a position that philosophers today would call 'compatibilist'. In popular thought he is sometimes associated with Pelagius. But this would be an exaggeration of his protest against a rigid emphasis on predestination. His position is not dissimilar from Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon

<sup>85</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, qu. 83, art. 1.

<sup>86</sup> Origen, *De principiis*, 1.5.2 (Eng., ANF, vol. 4, p. 256).

<sup>87</sup> Ernest Jauncey, *The Doctrine of Grace up to the End of the Pelagian Controversy* (London: SPCK, 1925), p. 136.

<sup>88</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* (Eng., Oxford and New York, N.Y.: OUP, 1991), 10.29.

<sup>89</sup> Augustine, *On the Merits and Remission of Sins*, 3.1 (Eng., NPNF, ser. 1, vol. 5, p. 69).

<sup>90</sup> Augustine, *On Nature and Grace* (Eng., NPNF, vol. 5, ch. 2, p. 122, and ch. 34, p. 132).



(1497–1560). Even prior to the Luther–Erasmus debate, Gottschalk of Orbais (c. 808 – c. 869) overstressed predestination, teaching even ‘double predestination’, while Scotus Erigena (c. 815 – c. 877) attacked Gottschalk, drawing on neoplatonic philosophy.

It becomes difficult to disentangle philosophical and theological debates. Many philosophers today distinguish between freedom of *action* and freedom of *will*. A person may freely select a course of action in terms of what is willed, but be unable to carry what is willed into action. One classic example would be that of an alcoholic, who wishes not to take another drink, but finds that he cannot avoid it. This brings us back to the theological debate about character. Commenting on free will and habit in Aquinas, Moxon observes, ‘A disposition to do a thing does not necessarily mean the performance of the action, nor does the possession of a habit imply also the exercise of that habit.’<sup>91</sup> Aquinas quotes Aristotle with approval as saying, ‘volition is of the end, but choice is of the means.’<sup>92</sup> In other words, the will is free to choose the means to an end, but constraints may limit effective *action*. He adds, ‘The reason for choosing a thing is that it conduces toward an end. But what is impossible cannot conduce to an end.’<sup>93</sup> Free choice, therefore, cannot guarantee the *achievement* of an end. The movement of the will, he concludes, resides in the intellect: ‘Choice is an act of rational power.’<sup>94</sup> Our success in carrying out our ends depends in part on factors which are wholly beyond our control, and therefore not our direct responsibility.

Among those who advocate determinism, some appeal (1) to divine sovereignty or predestination. Occasionalists in the Islamic tradition may understand every event as ‘the will of Allah’. (2) Others see a rigid and physical chain of cause and effect mapping out and also restricting possibilities, often within a mechanistic or pseudo-scientific framework. (3) Yet others appeal to psychological constraints of character, although this is limited by the experience of people acting ‘out of character’, or ‘not as themselves’. Against all these arguments is an intuitive sense of choice and responsibility which makes us all think of ourselves as moral agents. Yet this should not necessarily lead to a ‘liberty of indifference’ or belief in total equipoise in willing or deciding. Descartes might be said to have gone too

<sup>91</sup> Reginald S. Moxon, *The Doctrine of Sin: A Critical and Historical Investigation* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 158.

<sup>92</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, qu. 13, art. 3; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.2.

<sup>93</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, qu. 13, art. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II, qu. 13, art. 6.

far in this direction when he defined the will as having ‘the ability to do or not to do something’.<sup>95</sup>

The ethical dimension of appealing to moral responsibility as an indicator of free will emerges from Kant’s emphasis on moral obligation and ‘the good will’. Kant regarded duty as the moral or ‘categorical imperative’, to which we adhere whatever our personal inclinations, desires and experience of moral struggle. The poet Schiller, however, in spite of his admiration for Kant’s system, offers a satirical response to this aspect in Kant, which has been paraphrased in English as follows:

Willingly serve I my friends, but I do it, alas, with affection.  
Hence I am cursed with the doubt, virtue I have not attained.

He imagines Kant’s reply:

This is your only resource, you must stubbornly seek to abhor them;  
Then you can do with disgust that which the law may enjoin.<sup>96</sup>

An entirely good will that acts out of an entirely good character will not, or may not, produce any evidence of freedom of choice. The Apostle Paul, when he expounds the moral situation of humankind (most contemporary scholars do *not* interpret his ‘I as autobiographical), declares, ‘I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate’ (Rom. 7.15). He adds, anticipating Aquinas and many modern philosophers, ‘I can *will* what is right, but I cannot *do* it’ (7.18, my italics).

## Gender

In many societies gender is popularly regarded as a synonym for sex. However, most sociologists and psychologists regard the difference between these two terms as fundamental. Sex, they argue, is assigned at birth on the basis of *biological* features such as genitalia, sex chromosomes and internal reproductive structures. Gender, they often argue, constitutes an *internal sense* (or recognition of oneself) as male or female, which in turn is related to the *role in society* which people generally expect. Most sociologists and

<sup>95</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996, and La Salle, III: Open Court, 1901 (1641)), IV.

<sup>96</sup> Cited in J. S. Mackenzie, *A Manual of Ethics* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1929), p. 159.