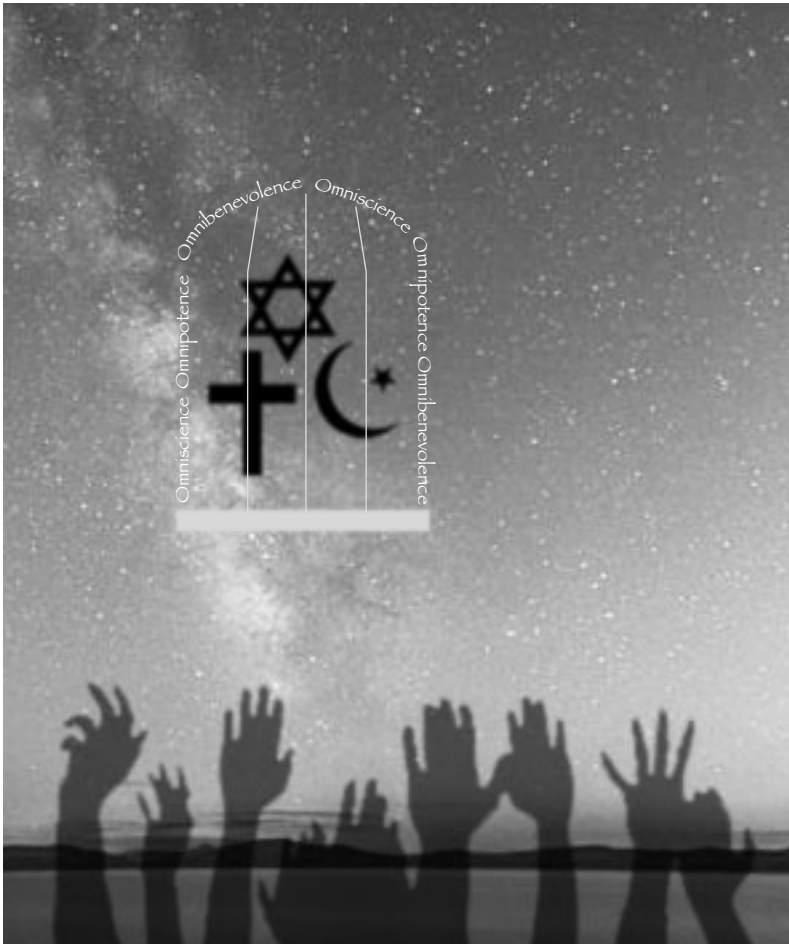


WHY DOES GOD NEED FREEDOM?



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ABSTRACT

God is often portrayed as being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Many worry that these traits make it so that God cannot possess free will. However, very little is said about why a God without freedom would be an issue. I argue that God does not need the kind of freedom we usually care about. I make a case that free will is important to us because it allows us to assign blame and praise to others. From here, I argue that being able to blame God is unimportant, and that God can still be praised even without free will.

The classical conception of God (as he is portrayed in much of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic theology and philosophy) is that he is a maximally perfect being.¹ This means that every good quality a being can possess, he possesses it to the maximum. From this, we can deduce that he must be all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and all-good (omnibenevolent), among other things. But this leads to a problem. For any choice God could make, he wants to pick the best option (because he is omnibenevolent), he knows what the best option is (because he is omniscient), and he is able to perform whatever action the best choice requires (because he is omnipotent). If this is true, then it seems that God does not have free will in deciding to perform that action.

This is a problem that many philosophers of religion have discussed.² However, there has not been much discussion about whether this is a problem. We generally view free will as important because freedom is a factor in whether someone is blameworthy or praiseworthy for their actions. If someone freely commits a crime, they are blameworthy, but if they are forced to commit a crime (through coercion, mind control, physical force, etc.), they are not blameworthy. Any threat to free will is a threat to accountability. But does this threat apply equally to God?

In this essay, I will explore the question of whether God needs free will. First, I will review why God might not have free will (according to a libertarian conception of free will) based on his attributes. Second, I will review the reasons why freedom is important for our conception of blame and praise. Third, I will examine whether these reasons need to be applied to God. I will ultimately conclude that, while freedom is very important for us, it is not important for God.

According to the libertarian conception of free will, an action is free if the agent performing the action could have instead done otherwise. For example, my choice to stay at a house party is only free if I could have instead not stayed at the house party. If I could have decided to leave and successfully walked out of the house, then my choice to stay was completely free. If for some reason I was unable to leave, by physical force or otherwise, then my choice to stay would not be free.

1 The classical conception of God also genders God as male, although this is sometimes regarded as problematic. The gendering of God is an interesting issue, but it is not relevant to this discussion and so I will not be getting into it here. I will be using male pronouns for God, but only for the sake of convenience.

2 For discussions on this topic, see William Rowe, "Can God Be Free?," *Faith and Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2002): 405-24, 10.5840/faithphil200219446; and Edward Wierenga, "The Freedom of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 19, no. 4 (2002): 425-36, 10.5840/faithphil200219447.

In God's case, it seems that if he is truly omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, he cannot do otherwise, no matter what choice he is making. How could he? Let us compare God, with all his perfections, to a regular human person, with all their imperfections. Why might a normal person not make the best possible choice in any scenario? First, a person may not want to choose the best possible choice. Maybe they would rather be evil, or simply ambivalent. Second, a person might be unsure about what the best choice is. In this case, they would have to make a judgment call and choose between two or more "could-be-best" options. Third, a person may not be able to make the best choice, whether they are physically unable to accomplish the required tasks or emotionally or mentally unable to follow through with what they know is best.

None of these is a problem for a maximally perfect God, however. First, God could never choose to do anything other than the best possible action, because he is omnibenevolent. Second, God could never be mistaken or unsure about what the best option is because he is omniscient. Third, God could never fail to follow through with performing the best action, because he is omnipotent. Adding these all together, it seems that God is unable to make any choice other than the best possible one since he would always desire to perform it, have knowledge of what it is, and possess the ability to do it. If free will requires being able to do otherwise, then this would imply that God does not have free will.

While there may be other reasons for valuing free will, arguably the most important reason is praise and blame. To quote Robert Kane, "Free will is also intimately related to notions of accountability, blameworthiness, and praiseworthiness..."³ This notion is fairly intuitive. If I rob a bank, I can rightfully be held responsible for my wrongdoing. But if I am being blackmailed, held at gunpoint, or implanted with a brain-controlling device, and thereby forced to rob a bank, I could not be held responsible for the robbery since it was not a free action. Since a free action is one in which the agent could have done otherwise, we could say that an agent cannot be blameworthy for their actions unless another course of action was available to them.

Of course, there are other factors that might affect one's blameworthiness. For example, ignorance is often assumed to absolve someone of blame. Carl Ginet gives the example:

Simon enters the hotel room he has just checked into and flips what appears to be, and he takes to be, an ordinary light switch, but, to his surprise and consternation, the flipping of the switch sets off a loud fire alarm. It seems that, because he did

3 Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.



not know that flipping the switch would have this unfortunate consequence, it would be wrong to feel indignant with him for bringing about that consequence.⁴

This is an example of a case where the agent (Simon) could have done otherwise but is not blameworthy. Being able to do otherwise seems to be a necessary, but not sufficient, reason for being blameworthy for an action. We might add a principle outlining that the agent must also be sufficiently aware of the consequences of their actions in addition to being able to do otherwise, but this, while technically true, is somewhat clumsy of an approach. Rather than add a new condition for each counterexample we encounter (for who knows how many more counterexamples could be conceived), I suggest we modify our first condition to be more specific. I propose that an agent is not blameworthy unless they could have done better.

To illustrate this, let us imagine a rather contrived example where I am held at gunpoint and coerced into robbing a bank. However, the captors are feeling generous and allow me to choose which bank I rob, giving me two choices. Let us call them Bank A and Bank B. Out of these two banks, I cannot see any reasons to rob one bank over the other (and let us grant that I am correct about this—there are no moral advantages to robbing Bank A rather than Bank B, and vice versa). Having no criteria on which to decide, I pick Bank A at random. After the crime is done, I am put on trial. After explaining to the court in detail how I was held at gunpoint and told to rob one of two banks, the prosecution objects. They argue that my robbing Bank A was a free action, which I voluntarily chose to do because I could have done otherwise—namely, I could have robbed Bank B instead. To the prosecutor's dismay, however, the judge, the jury, and the defense are unanimously unconvinced. The judge explains that because my choices were restricted to either robbing Bank A or robbing Bank B, and that these two choices are of equal moral value, I did not make a choice bearing any moral significance and should not be blamed. More specifically, my actions are not blameworthy because, although I could have done otherwise, I could not have done better.

This is key to what is valued about freedom. It is not merely the ability to do otherwise, but the ability to do better or worse. In order for someone to be blameworthy for an action, they have to have been able to do better than they did, and they must fail to do so. In other words, the freedom to do better or worse than we actually do is the freedom we care about.

Now that we have an understanding of the kind of freedom we care about—being able to do better or worse—we can investigate whether or not this kind of freedom is an important quality for God to have. I argue that God would not be any better off by having this freedom; I would go as far as to argue he would be worse off if he possessed the kind of freedom we care about.

If God is truly a maximally perfect being—omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent—then what does freedom add? In order to be free, he would need to be able to do otherwise. However, as discussed earlier, this seems to be incompatible with God's maximal perfection. There have been attempts to get around this, however. For example, Richard Swinburne argues while God's perfection does limit him, it does not limit him completely.⁵ In a choice between two equally good options, Swinburne gives the example of creating one of two equally good possible worlds. In this scenario, God could still choose between the equally good options, thus maintaining his freedom. However, this freedom does not amount to all that much. Edward Wierenga, in response to Swinburne and others who hold Swinburne's view, says:

It amounts to saying that God is free only when it does not matter what he does. In any situation in which there is a best action open to God, Swinburne and Flint agree that his nature compels him to do it. They only find room for God's freedom in circumstances in which any choice he makes is on a par with any other, where he might as well choose blindly or randomly, and that is not a significant amount of freedom.⁶

I am inclined to agree with Wierenga. The scenario Swinburne describes is analogous to the bank-robbing example I gave earlier; God choosing between perfect world A and perfect world B is the same as my choosing between bank A and bank B. This is to say, while we each could have done differently, neither of us could have done better or worse. The actions are technically free, but they lack the freedom we care about.

In order to have the freedom we care about, God would need to be able to do better or worse. This is, however, not only impossible but undesirable. First, God cannot do better, because every action God takes is the best action, on account of his maximal perfection. Similarly, God could not have ever done worse—nor would we want him to. To grant God the freedom we care about would be to allow God to do worse than he actually does; this is an undesirable outcome. In the end, it seems better that God lacks the freedom to do worse.

4 Carl Ginet, "The Epistemic Requirements for Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 267-77, 10.1111/0029-4624.34.s14.14.

5 Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 134-35.

6 Wierenga, "Freedom of God," 433.



This does have the consequence of God being exempt from blame for all his actions. Since he cannot perform any actions of which he could have done better, he cannot perform any actions that are blameworthy. This consequence is a non-issue, however. Since God always performs the best possible action, he would never perform an action for which he could be blamed, even if he had the freedom necessary. In the end, exempting God from blame changes nothing about God.

But what about praise? After all, if he could not have done worse, can he really be praised for his actions? Given that praise and worship are important parts of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, God's lack of freedom could be devastating to their theology if it implies that God is not praiseworthy. Luckily, there are compelling reasons to believe that praise is not subject to the same considerations as blame. While blame requires that we could have done better, praise does not require that we could have done worse. Susan Wolf argues for such a position in her essay "Asymmetrical Freedom," in which she points out, "If an agent does the right thing for just the right reason, it seems absurd to ask whether he could have done the wrong. 'I cannot tell a lie,' 'He couldn't hurt a fly' are not exemptions from praiseworthiness but testimonies to it."⁷ Following this logic, God's inability to do worse does not prevent people from praising God; rather, this is precisely the reason God should be praised. God's lack of freedom in no way implies a lack of praiseworthiness, but rather inadvertently implies the opposite.

God's lack of freedom seems to be of no consequence. We cannot blame God for his actions, but that was already the case since he would never perform any bad action for which we could blame him. We can still praise God for his good actions, since his inability to do worse than he actually does only adds to his praiseworthiness. While freedom is an important feature for us humans to have, who are imperfect, it is not important that God share the same freedom.

It is worth noting that when I say God does not need free will, I mean the libertarian conception of free will, which is the version I have been working with through this analysis and argument. This does not rule out the option of adopting a compatibilist theory of free will (one that denies that freedom requires being able to do otherwise) instead.⁸ I am in favor of compatibilism; however, my goal in the article was to show that if you adopt the libertarian theory of free will (namely, that free actions are ones where the agent could have done otherwise), then there is no reason to think that God has any use for free will. I contend that God is better off without libertarian free will, and maximal perfection is a fine alternative.

⁷ Susan Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom," *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 3 (1980): 156, 10.2307/2025667.

⁸ An approach suggested in Wierenga, "Freedom of God," 434.



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