

Free Will in Heaven: Proximate Compatibilism and Moral Perfection

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Abstract

The Problem of Heavenly Freedom explores the tension between the concept of free will and the absence of sin in heaven, challenging traditional notions of moral freedom. This paper examines James Sennett's solution, known as "proximate compatibilism," which argues that heavenly freedom can coexist with a form of determinism based on the moral character developed through earthly choices. Sennett contends that true freedom does not require the potential for evil but instead reflects the ability to act in accordance with one's highest good. Building on Sennett's framework, Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe offer an extension that incorporates libertarian freedom, suggesting that moral perfection enhances rather than diminishes free will by allowing individuals to choose among various good actions that reflect their alignment with divine goodness. The paper also addresses potential objections, such as the concern that this view undermines significant moral freedom and the role of divine grace, providing rebuttals that highlight the transformative power of character and the synergistic relationship between human choice and divine assistance. By redefining the nature of free will in the context of heavenly existence, this paper presents a compelling argument that true freedom is realized through the alignment of the will with moral perfection, offering a deeper understanding of human destiny and the ultimate purpose of spiritual growth.

Keywords

Free Will, Heavenly Freedom, Moral Perfection, Proximate Compatibilism, Determinism, Character Formation, Libertarian Freedom

1. Introduction

The Problem of Heavenly Freedom revolves around the compatibility of free will with the absence of sin in heaven. This problem is grounded in a few key

assumptions:

- 1) there is no evil in heaven,
- 2) there exists free will in heaven, and
- 3) free will seems to necessitate the possibility of evil, as evidenced by our earthly experiences.

Free will is often understood as the ability to make choices that can lead to moral good or evil ([Free Will | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2024](#)). The traditional Christian doctrine maintains that humans in heaven will possess free will yet be incapable of sinning, presenting an apparent contradiction: how can individuals be truly free if they are unable to choose evil? If God, being all-good and hating sin, has the ability to determine our free will so that we never choose evil, why wouldn't he create a world where this is the case? ([Will People Still Have Free Will in Heaven?, 2024](#)) This scenario seems ideal, as it would allow God to express his love by granting us free will while simultaneously eliminating all moral evil ([Gaine, 2003](#)). This dilemma raises questions about the nature of free will itself and whether it can exist without the potential for moral failure.

The problem of free will and sin in heaven has been a subject of theological and philosophical discourse for centuries. Thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas have grappled with this issue, attempting to reconcile the traditional view of heaven with the philosophical implications of free will. Augustine, in his *The City of God*, for instance, argues that heavenly freedom is of a higher order, where the will is set free from the delight in sinning, thus allowing for a state of being that is both free and morally impeccable ([Augustine of Hippo, 1950](#)). Over the years, various solutions have been proposed, including compatibilism, which suggests that free will can coexist with determinism, and the Molinist perspective, which posits that God's middle knowledge ensures that the redeemed freely choose not to sin ([Stent, 2002](#)). Each approach attempts to address the paradox of maintaining genuine freedom without the presence of sin.

This paper will consider an argument presented in the paper "Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven" by Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe ([Pawl & Timpe, 2009](#)), in which they argue that free will in heaven can be maintained through a moral character formed by freely made choices on earth, which precludes sin without compromising true freedom.

2. Preface

2.1. Justification and Rationale

This research aims to resolve the longstanding theological paradox of how free will can exist in a sinless heaven. Traditionally, free will has been understood as the ability to choose between good and evil, raising the question of whether free will remains meaningful in an environment where sin is impossible. By examining the frameworks of proximate compatibilism and libertarian freedom, the paper explores how moral character formation on Earth may allow for a kind of freedom in heaven that is both fully realized and devoid of the potential for sin.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to shift the understanding of free will and moral perfection in a theological context. It challenges the traditional view that free will necessitates the possibility of moral failure, instead suggesting that true freedom is the ability to act in perfect alignment with one's highest good. This reconceptualization has profound implications for understanding the nature of human destiny, spiritual growth, and the ultimate purpose of life within a framework that emphasizes the transformative power of character and divine grace.

2.2. Literature Review

The topic of heavenly freedom, particularly the reconciliation of free will with the absence of sin in heaven, has been a subject of deep theological and philosophical exploration for centuries. The foundational discussion of this issue can be traced back to Saint Augustine, who in his works, particularly *The City of God*, grappled with the idea that the redeemed in heaven possess free will yet are incapable of sinning. Augustine proposed that heavenly freedom is of a higher order, where the will is set free from any delight in sinning, allowing for a state of being that is both morally impeccable and truly free. This view set the stage for subsequent theological discussions, where the focus shifted to understanding how such freedom could coexist with moral perfection.

One of the key contemporary discussions on this issue is found in the work of Douglas Erlandson and Charles Sayward, who in their paper "Is Heaven a Possible World?" address the logical challenges associated with the concept of free will in heaven (Douglas & Sayward, 1981). They explore whether a world that contains free will but no evil, such as heaven, is logically coherent. Their analysis raises significant questions about the nature of free will, suggesting that if heaven is a possible world without evil, it challenges the necessity of evil in any world where free will exists. This argument has implications for theodicy and the broader understanding of divine omnipotence and goodness.

Antony Flew, in his essay "Compatibilism, Free Will and God," further contributes to this debate by examining the Free Will Defense in the context of the problem of evil. Flew critically evaluates whether the coexistence of free will and determinism (compatibilism) can sufficiently account for the presence of evil while maintaining God's omnipotence and goodness (Flew, 1973). He questions whether true freedom can exist if it is compatible with being determined to always choose good, thereby challenging the traditional compatibilist responses to the problem of heavenly freedom.

Finally, Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe in their paper "Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven," critique previous attempts to reconcile free will with moral impeccability in heaven, such as those offered by compatibilism (Pawl & Timpe, 2009). They propose an alternative view that preserves the traditional understanding of heavenly freedom by arguing that the redeemed in heaven, through their freely formed moral character, can be free yet incapable of sinning. Their

approach seeks to maintain the essence of free will while acknowledging the transformative effect of sanctification, which aligns the will so perfectly with the good that sin becomes an impossible choice.

These discussions collectively provide a robust foundation for understanding the complex interplay between free will, moral perfection, and divine omnipotence in the context of heaven. They highlight the ongoing philosophical struggle to reconcile human freedom with the divine attributes and the ultimate destiny of the redeemed.

2.3. Definition of Concepts

To ensure clarity and precision, it is essential to define the key concepts discussed in this paper. Free will traditionally refers to the ability of individuals to make choices that are not entirely determined by prior causes, particularly the choice between good and evil. In theological discussions, free will is often tied to the notion of moral responsibility, where the capacity to choose freely is considered essential for moral accountability (Martin & Augustine, 2015). Moral perfection, in this context, refers to a state where an individual's character is so aligned with the good that they consistently choose actions that reflect this alignment, without any inclination toward evil.

Proximate compatibilism is a philosophical view that seeks to reconcile free will with a form of determinism, particularly in the context of heavenly existence. It posits that while individuals in heaven may be determined to act according to their moral character, this determination is not contrary to free will because the character was freely formed through choices made during earthly life. Libertarian freedom, on the other hand, emphasizes the idea that free will requires the genuine ability to choose otherwise, meaning that individuals must have the capacity to choose between multiple possible actions. In this paper, libertarian freedom is discussed in the context of whether such freedom can exist in a state of moral perfection, where the potential for evil is absent but choices among various good actions remain possible.

3. Argument

The Problem of Heavenly Freedom addresses the apparent contradiction between free will and the absence of sin in heaven. James Sennett offers a solution known as "proximate compatibilism," which proposes that heavenly freedom can coexist with a form of determinism rooted in character formation (Sennett, 1999). According to Sennett, free will in heaven does not necessitate the capacity to choose evil; rather, it involves actions determined by a moral character that has been freely developed through choices made on earth. In this view, individuals in heaven are free because their decisions are guided by a character that inherently aligns with goodness, shaped by their previous free actions. This concept is critical in distinguishing between different types of determinism and indeterminism.

Remote determination refers to events that are inevitably determined by the

laws of nature and the state of the world at any time prior to the event. In contrast, proximate determination describes events determined by the immediate state of the world just before they occur. This distinction is crucial for Sennett's philosophy because it allows for a form of freedom that is neither entirely determined by past external factors nor entirely undetermined. Sennett's philosophy further distinguishes between remote undetermination and proximate undetermination. Remote undetermination implies that there is a point in the past where the laws of nature and the state of the world do not necessarily determine an event's occurrence. Proximate undetermination means there is no specific past time guaranteeing the event's occurrence.

In Sennett's view, heavenly actions are proximately determined by the character formed freely through earthly choices, rather than being remotely determined by external forces. For example, consider the scenario where an individual cannot will themselves to torture a child for a nickel. This inability is not a limitation on their freedom but a testament to their deeply ingrained moral character, which sees no good reason for engaging in such a repugnant action. In heaven, the redeemed are similarly incapable of choosing evil due to the moral character they have freely developed. Sennett challenges the traditional notion that free will requires the potential for moral failure, proposing instead that true freedom is found in the ability to pursue one's highest good without the inclination to sin.

Traditionally, free will has been understood as the mere potential to choose between good and evil, emphasizing the availability of both options. However, Sennett argues that true freedom involves understanding the full range of possibilities and making a deliberate choice in favor of the good. In his view, a person who has consistently chosen virtuous actions is akin to someone who has been "blinded, not by darkness, but by excessive light," indicating that their moral vision is so perfectly attuned to goodness that they cannot see evil as a viable option. Just as we do not call blindness incurred by either darkness or excessive light true "sight," Sennett suggests that the inability to choose evil in heaven is not a restriction but rather a reflection of a perfected will. This understanding of freedom is transformative, as it emphasizes the role of character in shaping decisions and underscores that moral perfection enhances rather than restricts free will.

To illustrate this concept, consider the example of Amy, a person who has spent her life cultivating virtues such as compassion and justice. Over time, Amy's choices have shaped her character to the extent that she naturally finds joy in actions that promote these values. After Amy goes to heaven, she loses the ability to choose unjust actions. However, Sennett believes that this is not a limitation on her free will, but rather a manifestation of her deeply ingrained moral character. In other words, she was free to choose what sort of character she desired to be on earth, and in heaven, her actions are a portrayal of these choices. She is free to choose among a range of good actions, each consistent with her virtuous nature, such as advocating for fairness or helping others in need. This concept of freedom challenges the traditional view that free will requires the potential for wrongdoing,

instead suggesting that true freedom is found in the pursuit of one's highest good.

Building on Sennett's framework, Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe extend the argument by asserting that non-derivative, or libertarian, freedom can coexist with moral perfection in heaven (Pawl & Timpe, 2009). While Sennett argues that one's freely formed character on earth determines all the actions one performs in heaven, Pawl and Timpe argue that this is not the case, and the moral agent is able to choose some of his/her actions in heaven. They argue that moral perfection enhances it by enabling individuals to choose among various good actions that reflect their alignment with the ultimate good. They give the example of choosing between wanting to sing in the heavenly choir or playing the harp, as these two are both consistent with moral goodness, the agent is free to choose between these two actions. This, Pawl and Timpe argue, shows that there can be non-derivative free choices even in heaven. This view posits that moral perfection is not a static state but an active engagement with the good, where individuals exercise their freedom by choosing actions that contribute to the flourishing of themselves and others, and bring them closer to God.

For example, consider David, an artist who has cultivated a deep appreciation for beauty and creativity throughout his life. In heaven, David's character is so attuned to these values that he naturally gravitates toward artistic expression. He is free to choose among various creative pursuits, such as painting, composing music, or collaborating with others, each of which contributes to the beauty and joy of the heavenly realm. David's inability to engage in destructive or degrading actions is not a restriction on his freedom but a reflection of his alignment with the good. In heaven, David is at the highest level of his character, and therefore he just cannot will himself to be destructive, just as we cannot will ourselves to torture a child for a nickel. Being close to God and heavenly, they will just see no reason and will to engage in sinful actions. Pawl and Timpe's solution, similar to Sennett's, illustrates that heavenly freedom involves choosing among diverse goods that are consistent with a perfected character, demonstrating how moral perfection and free will coexist. This perspective emphasizes that true freedom is found in the ability to pursue one's ultimate good without the temptation of sin.

By combining Sennett's and Pawl and Timpe's approaches, we gain a comprehensive understanding of heavenly freedom as a state where individuals act in accordance with their moral perfection. Sennett's idea of character-driven determinism provides the foundation for Pawl and Timpe's assertion that moral perfection enhances freedom, allowing for a robust form of choice that aligns with one's ultimate good.

4. Counter Arguments

One potential counterargument to this argument is the concern that their approach effectively removes significant moral freedom from the redeemed in heaven, as it implies that all morally relevant actions are determined by character. Critics might argue that this account undermines the significance of free will by

suggesting that individuals in heaven lack the ability to make morally significant choices, and are only able to make choices such as whether to play the harp or sing, since they cannot choose between good and evil. This perspective hinges on the belief that true freedom requires the possibility of choosing otherwise, even in a morally perfect environment. As such, the critics contend that a heaven where every action is predetermined by character does not allow for genuine freedom, as it restricts individuals to choices that only align with their established moral character, thus failing to capture the essence of free will as traditionally understood (Schoenig, 1998).

In response, this model of heavenly freedom does not eliminate meaningful choice but redefines it within the context of moral perfection. They could assert that true freedom is not diminished by the lack of evil choices but is instead enhanced by the capacity to choose among multiple good options that reflect one's perfected nature. For instance, in heaven, individuals might choose between different virtuous actions that contribute to the flourishing of others and the glory of God, such as acts of creativity, teaching, or service. The focus shifts from the mere presence of alternative possibilities to the quality and significance of the choices available, emphasizing that freedom is about pursuing the highest good rather than navigating between good and evil. This perspective argues that the richness of heavenly freedom lies in the alignment of will with the good, offering a more profound and fulfilling expression of free will.

Another objection is the accusation that this view potentially leads to Pelagianism, as it seems to suggest that humans can achieve moral perfection through their own efforts without the necessity of divine grace. Critics might argue that if individuals in heaven are incapable of sinning because they have formed their character to align with goodness through their own choices, this implies that salvation and moral perfection can be attained independently of God's transformative grace. Such a view could be seen as inconsistent with traditional Christian doctrines that emphasize the essential role of divine grace in sanctification and salvation, potentially undermining the belief in the necessity of God's grace for moral development and perfection.

In response, this account of heavenly freedom does not exclude the necessity of divine grace but rather incorporates it as a foundational element of character formation. While individuals play a role in shaping their character through free choices, it is ultimately God's grace that enables and sustains their moral growth. The process of character development involves a synergy between human freedom and divine assistance, where grace empowers individuals to pursue virtue and align their will with the good. In this view, grace is indispensable for achieving moral perfection, and the capacity for making free choices is a gift from God, allowing for the genuine cooperation of human and divine action in the formation of a morally perfect character. Thus, their solution maintains a balance between human freedom and the transformative power of divine grace, upholding the theological commitment to grace as central to salvation and sanctification.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the question of whether free will exists in heaven and how it can coexist with the absence of sin is a profound and enduring issue in theology and philosophy. The Problem of Heavenly Freedom challenges traditional conceptions of free will, moral perfection, and divine grace, prompting scholars to explore how these concepts interact in the context of heaven. The solutions proposed by James Sennett, Timothy Pawl, and Kevin Timpe provide valuable insights into how free will might function in a state of moral perfection. By emphasizing the role of character formation and divine grace, these solutions suggest that true freedom is not merely the ability to choose between good and evil but the capacity to act in alignment with one's highest good.

This question is important because it touches on core aspects of human identity and destiny, exploring what it means to be free and morally perfect. It has implications for our understanding of human nature, the purpose of earthly life, and the nature of salvation (Thorsen, 2020). The exploration of heavenly freedom invites us to consider the ultimate goals of moral and spiritual growth, encouraging us to reflect on how we can cultivate virtues that align our will with the good. By examining these issues, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of free will and moral perfection, enhancing our understanding of the divine-human relationship and the potential for human flourishing in a state of perfect harmony with God.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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