



## REVIEW

Freedom and Sin: Evil in a World Created by God by Ross McCullough, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2022, pp. xii + 244, £40.99, hbk

Certain theological questions continue to trouble us. How can we have free will if God is the source of every element of our actions? If God is Creator of all that is, how can we explain the existence of evil without ascribing it to God? How can we make sense of God, who permits grave evil and horrendous suffering? That such questions are raised in every generation suggests that ‘solutions’ put forward fail, at least for some, to resolve the perennial questions.

Ross McCullough joins a long list of theologians and philosophers who offer new responses. Rather than look to wholly novel solutions, he avails primarily of the treasury of reflection given us by great thinkers across the centuries, including St Irenaeus, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Blessed Duns Scotus, as well as some recent authors such as Hans Urs Von Balthasar and David Burrell.

To appreciate what McCullough achieves in *Freedom and Sin*, it is best to follow what McCullough himself does: he starts with the overall narrative, presented in a substantial Introduction, before examining the constituent elements of the narrative across four chapters.

At the centre of McCullough’s account is what he terms an ‘indeterminist compatibilist’ conception of the relation of divine and human agency. Compatibilism is the view that human freedom is compatible with determinism, in this case that human freedom can obtain even when God works in us inflexibly, i.e. with no possibility of our defection from the divine will. This upholds a non-competitive relation of divine and human agency, since, in standard Thomist terms: even when God works in us inflexibly, God is the source of our freedom, a freedom manifested in the functioning of our faculties in accord with reason and the good.

The indeterminist element is present because God can also work in us defectibly: God can move us towards the good but allow the possibility of our defection from the divine will and therefore of sin. Unsurprisingly, given his compatibilist sympathies, McCullough does not explain the value or purpose of the possibility of defectibility in terms of freedom, which would also be at odds with God’s exemplary causality of human freedom, since God’s freedom involves no possibility of evil acts. But the value and purpose of the possibility of defectibility can be at least partially explained in terms of what McCullough calls ‘self-creation’, which he understands in indeterministic terms.

McCullough cites St Gregory of Nyssa (p. 153) that ‘we give birth to ourselves by our own free choice of what is good’. Given McCullough’s compatibilist sympathies, one might have expected him to think that since God’s inflexible work in us upholds human freedom, self-creation might somehow be accounted for on wholly compatibilist grounds. Indeed, in keeping with St Irenaeus, McCullough holds human freedom is less perfect through its capacity for defection: the ability to commit evil is

not an ingredient of our freedom. But, also in keeping with St Irenaeus, McCullough thinks that an indeterministic possibility, the exercise of libertarian freedom in self-creation, is necessary for the goods that are ‘especially valuable [in] manner or mode, when they could be forfeited and are not’ (p. 133). By invoking Sts Gregory and Irenaeus, McCullough is on safe ground in his use of a term that could raise moral anti-realist suspicions: McCullough’s conception of self-creation is very different from, for example, Christine Korsgaard’s conception of self-constitution.

McCullough’s narrative thus avails of the attractions of both compatibilist and indeterminist accounts. The employment of opposing positions is typical of McCullough’s intentionally irenic approach. The irenicism is motivated not only by a desire to avail of valuable insights no matter their origin: it exhibits an admirable moral and spiritual concern. Indeed, in a footnote (pp. 147–8), McCullough takes issue with theologians who are unduly dismissive of Scotus, that they should show more respect to one counted among the *beati*, whatever their own personal estimation of his theology. To this one can add a particularly charitable interpretation of Balthasar’s account of analogy (pp. 157–166), a highlight of the book.

Yet, perhaps inevitably in such an ambitious work that seeks to do justice to a plethora of positions and debates, there are grounds for niggles. Within the compass of a book of moderate length, McCullough’s narrative, made up of numerous and varied elements, impressively supports a range of theological desiderata, such as upholding that divine and human agency are not in competition, and an explanation of why we human beings were not from the beginning created in beatitude. The price of the large canvas approach, however, is that highly complex and contentious issues are dealt with a brevity that might trouble the professional philosopher. Even allowing leeway, some of the discussions strike me as too compressed, for example the discussion of Luis de Molina and Diego Báñez (pp. 36–46) in relation to God’s foreknowledge and human freedom.

Furthermore, whilst I agree for the most part with John E. Hare in his helpful foreword that *Freedom and Sin* is ‘beautifully written’ (p. viii), the book nevertheless contains instances in which beautiful style should have given way to clarity. Consider, for example: ‘And one way to see the difference between them is that Thomas allows more slippage between these words and our concepts such that our concepts can be broken open to track more closely their divine referent’ (p. 147). What exactly is meant by ‘slippage’ and ‘broken open’? Such details can matter.

In evaluating a work such as *Freedom and Sin*, much depends on what the reader is looking for. Professional philosophers might admire greatly the narrative arc, whilst decrying McCullough’s skirting over (by many philosophical standards) contentious and knotty details. But others will, I think, find *Freedom and Sin* to be a refreshingly inclusive book. Even if such readers might still prefer more detailed discussions in places, there is value in prioritising a comprehensive narrative within a text of moderate length, which presumably would have been lost had McCullough dived into the philosophical labyrinths. Whatever one’s preferences, *Freedom and Sin* provides a springboard to stimulate a search, if required, for greater detail elsewhere. And, certainly, the work contains an impressively varied set of discussions on, *inter alia*, freedom, analogy, predestination, sin, and ecclesiology (especially on self-creation as applied to the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ).

The main contribution of the book is perhaps less in its advocacy of compatibilist indeterminism, a position not especially hard to find within the tradition even if neglected more recently; but, rather, in the skilful combining of elements from many thinkers to form what is, I think, a plausible (though not incontestable) and certainly ambitious synthesis framed in contemporary terms. It was a pleasure to read a work of philosophical theology presented with such sophistication, critical sensitivity to the tradition, attunement to existential realities, and a generosity of spirit.

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