

¹⁴Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn't Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 120.

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Response to Alan Dickin by Patrick Franklin

I would like to express my gratitude to Alan Dickin for his thoughtful response to my article on theodicy and the historical Adam (Patrick Franklin, "Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings," *PSCF* 74, no. 1 [2022]: 39–53). I have appreciated the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the issues, particularly on the nature and implications of freedom in relation to sin. Specifically, I have had opportunity to read the key article by James F. Sennett that Dickin cites,¹ as well as various articles in the journal *Faith and Philosophy* which engage Sennett and move the discussion forward.² This has been a stimulating and enriching exercise, for which I thank Alan. He rightly notes that the discussion of "the dilemma of heavenly freedom" has been extensively debated in theological-philosophical literature, though I think it's also important to point out that the debate is far from being settled.

Dickin's concern regarding human freedom is two-fold: first, he suggests that my account of heavenly freedom is inadequate; second, he worries that my argument threatens to undermine the freewill defence in theodicy. In response, I would like to concede—partly, at least—the first point: I do think my account of freedom could and should be improved (though I'm not sure anyone has yet offered a fully satisfactory response to the dilemma of heavenly freedom). However, I would like to reject or at least assuage the second concern.

Dickin draws on Sennett's article to endorse what Sennett calls the "*Proximate Conception* of freedom." Sennett puts forth this notion of freedom in order to avoid two problematic responses to the dilemma of heavenly freedom, that is, to reject either (a) the idea that human beings are sinless (and incapable of sin) in heaven or (b) the idea that humans lack freedom in heaven. His conception of freedom in heaven is "*proximate*" in the sense that the choices of perfected humans in heaven are proximately determined (since humans can no longer choose evil) but not remotely determined (i.e., determined *all the way down*, we might say). To give an illustration of how this works, my present (but predetermined) incapability to

choose the evil of brutally torturing an innocent child for five cents might be grounded in freely chosen decisions and acts that have shaped my character in the past in such a way that I am unable to make this choice in the present (thankfully). Sennett argues that freedom is forfeited only if heavenly choices are both proximately and remotely determined, that is, only if proximately determined choices in heaven do not point back in some way to previous nondetermined libertarian choices made during my life on Earth.

The upshot of Sennett's solution to the dilemma of heavenly freedom is that "there is a way to argue that heaven has only compatibilist freedom while Earth includes at least some libertarian freedom," leading to the conclusion that the lack of human capacity to sin in heaven does not diminish human freedom so long as present proximate determinism is grounded in past (i.e., historically, during one's life on Earth) libertarian choice(s). Hence, the more expanded terminology Sennett gives to his notion: the "*proximate conception of compatibilist freedom*." Dickin summarizes, "For humans, this 'causal history' is established on Earth as a choice for or against God, and *apparently becomes irrevocable after death*, so that those who chose God are 'determined' to always will good" (italics added). I have italicized part of this summary to indicate something that Dickin leaves out of his summary of Sennett, something which is crucial but which also raises puzzling theological questions.

Sennett goes on to clarify that it is possible to affirm heavenly freedom, even if it is proximately determined, if that freedom is grounded in the agent's freely chosen (in the libertarian sense) character formation during life on Earth. As he puts it, "a character that is libertarian freely chosen is the only kind of character that can determine compatibilist free actions."³ Expanding on this, he writes, "The dilemma of heavenly freedom is resolved if all libertarian free actions contributing to the characters of agents in heaven were performed while those agents were on Earth. That is, the characters are formed on Earth, but those characters determine only actions for good once the agents enter heaven."⁴ The advantage of this proposal is that it safeguards both the freedom of human beings in heaven (in a compatibilist sense) while also safeguarding the freewill defense to the theodicy problem (which requires that human beings possess—or possessed at some point—libertarian freedom).

For brevity, I will mention two theological problems with Sennett's proposal. The first is the charge

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of Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, which Sennett acknowledges as potentially problematic but does not—to my satisfaction—offer a sufficient response. In short, his solution seems to attribute too much of our glorified state to our own human actions and choices and gives insufficient attention to the transformative and miraculous work of God in perfecting us (e.g., Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 15:49–53; Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 21:3–5). Incidentally, what he lacks is the kind of participatory trinitarian theological framework that I propose in my *PSCF* article, which accounts for how God enables human agency while also sharing with us important properties of God’s own divine life and character.

The second problem is that Sennett does not explain how our heavenly character becomes sufficiently holy and perfect (and stably enduring) so as to make us incapable of sinning in heaven. Other thinkers offer potential explanations for this, but these explanations in turn beg more questions. For example, Robert Hartman suggests that our character could be perfected in one of two ways, either by a unilateral and immediately effective act of God when humans are resurrected (the unilateral model) or by means of cooperative divine assistance over time (the cooperative model), which most likely requires a doctrine of post-mortem existence in purgatory.⁵ He goes on to demonstrate by philosophical argument why the cooperative model is superior and more likely to be true. While these theological problems are not necessarily insurmountable, they are certainly controversial, especially for Protestants.⁶

In sum, does Sennett’s proposal solve the dilemma of heavenly freedom? Perhaps it does help, and the subsequent discussion of this problem in *Faith and Philosophy* is indeed interesting and enriching, but it also raises significant theological questions that demand further reflection and clarification.

In response to Dickin’s worry that my argument undermines the freewill defense, let me offer two brief points. First, it is not my intention to undermine the freewill defense; indeed, I hold to a theological version of the freewill defense, though space precludes me from explicating it here. Dickin writes that “Franklin seems to be suggesting that God’s behavior is inexplicable.” I suggest nothing of the sort; in fact, I explicitly write, “I am not suggesting that God lacks sufficiently justified reasons for allowing sin and evil into the world.”⁷ I simply do not fully understand those reasons in a detailed way, nor do I think that scripture gives us a clear answer.

Second, whatever we make of the arguments of Sennett and others concerning heavenly freedom, none of that necessitates the existence of a historical Adam. Dickin seems to tie the historical existence of Adam to the freewill defense in a way that I do not. He writes, “The above argument shows that the Proximate Conception of freedom satisfies the Free Will Defense. This therefore supports the traditional view that Adam and Eve, under the influence of the serpent, were the originators of human sin.” However, this is a *non sequitur*. The freewill defense does not logically require the existence of Adam and Eve, nor does it require an idyllic state of original perfection. All that it requires is that humans had (or have) the opportunity to either accept or reject God’s grace and Lordship, that they reject(ed) it, and that morally significant suffering and evil are thus the consequence of the misuse of human freedom rather than the creation of God.

Thanks once again to Alan for a stimulating exchange. I fully acknowledge that there is much more to discuss.

Notes

¹James F. Sennett, “Is There Freedom in Heaven?,” *Faith and Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 69–82, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19991617>.

²These include Timothy Pawl and Kevin Timpe, “Incompatibilism, Sin, and Free Will in Heaven,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (2009): 398–419, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200926437>; Christopher M. Brown, “Making the Best Even Better: Modifying Pawl and Timpe’s Solution to the Problem of Heavenly Freedom,” *Faith and Philosophy* 32, no. 1 (2015): 63–80, <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil201531629>; and Robert J. Hartman, “Heavenly Freedom and Two Models of Character Perfection,” *Faith and Philosophy* 38, no. 1 (2021): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.1.4>.

³Sennett, “Freedom in Heaven,” 74.

⁴*Ibid.*, 75.

⁵Hartman, “Heavenly Freedom,” 47–48. Brown leans toward a unilateral model, drawing on Aquinas’s discussion of the beatific vision of the saints in heaven as a participation in God’s own life, such that the beatitude of the saints is invariable, immutable, and timeless (Brown, “Making the Best Even Better,” 73–74).

⁶Despite the lack of biblical evidence for purgatory, the evangelical philosopher Jerry Walls makes a philosophical case for the existence of purgatory along similar lines. See Jerry L. Walls, “Hell and Purgatory,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 145–73.

⁷Patrick S. Franklin, “Theodicy and the Historical Adam: Questioning a Central Assumption Motivating Historicist Readings,” *PSCF* 74, no. 1 (2022): 43.

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