

Bignon's Review of Mere Molinism: A Rejoinder

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My published book—*Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism*¹—has, for the most part, received extremely positive reviews, but I had anticipated a negative response from Guillaume Bignon, a Calvinist philosopher whom I critique in the book.² Bignon did not fail to disappoint and criticizes almost everything in the book; from my English and grammar, to my philosophy and theology.³ I agree that there are a few minor aspects of my book which could be improved and I will make appropriate changes if and when a second edition is ever published. But many of Bignon's complaints regarding the "quality of writing" and my command of the English language seem like an attempt to "poison the well" before addressing the important content within the well. To be specific, with no intention to be unkind to a philosopher I greatly respect, I feel at times Bignon is dangerously close to slipping into an *ad hominem* mode to discredit the book. He is especially scathing in his criticism of the first chapter—the introduction—to which he spilled much ink. For example, in those first pages, he criticizes the lack of definition of certain words but then in paragraphs later he states, "Stratton's definitions of some of the important concepts in the free will debates are actually found in multiple places in the book, not just in the introduction" (p. 5). Bignon may have approached the subject differently, but my goal was to "introduce" the subjects of the book without going into great detail, nor with giving rigorous definitions to concepts which are unpacked in later chapters.

Bignon similarly critiques the illustrations of biblical data of both determinism and human freedom in the second chapter (p. 8-12). My stated purpose of Chapter 2 was not to debate the issues of libertarian freedom and determinism but instead to highlight the dilemma of the two *seemingly* opposite positions which should frame the debate (P. 14). In other words, this purpose was to simply demonstrate why a face-value reading of some Scriptures leads some to think libertarian freedom does not exist, while different scriptures lead others to think that humanity does possess libertarian freedom. The stated goal was to expose readers to provide the foundation for the disagreement the rest of the book sought to resolve.

It would be easy to start responding to all of Bignon's complaints, but I'll refrain from doing so for the sake of brevity. My aim in what follows is to respond to his critique of the main content and arguments found in my book. I take Bignon's major issues to be the following:

- 1- Definition of Determinism
- 2- Historical Eisegeses
- 3- Philosophical Objections

¹ Timothy A. Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism: A Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Philosophical Analysis*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

² Bignon and I have interacted via YouTube on several occasions. See the following videos:

Determinism Refuted Biblically (hosted by Leighton Flowers): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSMJR...>

Determinism Refuted Theologically (hosted by Braxton Hunter): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7qcm...>

Determinism Refuted Philosophically (hosted by Tim Stratton): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjIMb...>

A Rational Refutation of Divine Determinism (hosted by Tim Stratton): <https://youtu.be/qFKg0veH7fo>

³ Guillaume Bignon, *A critical review and fairly comprehensive refutation of "Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism" by Timothy A. Stratton*, <http://www.associationaxiome.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Response-to-Tim-Stratton.pdf>

- 4- Theological Issues
- 5- Apologetic Significance

I will address these in order.

Definition of Determinism

According to Bignon (p. 7), my use of “exhaustive” in “exhaustive (divine) determinism” is superfluous because “determinism is the thesis that *all things* are determined by antecedent factors” (emphasis mine).⁴ However, such a definition of determinism requires clarification and, thus, I distinguish between *exhaustive* and *non-exhaustive* (divine) determinism. The former says that all things, apart from some ultimate ground, are causally determined by external factors, and the latter says that some, but not all, things (e.g., all non-conscious things) are causally determined by external factors while others (e.g., some conscious beings) are not.⁵

Bignon also finds fault with one of my aims, namely, to not merely argue against the “thesis of compatibilism,” but to “demonstrate that this thesis does not actually correspond to reality [EDD is false], and thus, compatibilism does not always explain the way things are” (p.162). Bignon (p. 7), however, objects that, to say compatibilism “does not actually correspond to reality” is just to say that it is false and, in turn, *never* explains the way things are. Perhaps I could have been clearer. Nevertheless, my point is simply that the view that *all* human “free” actions are compatible with determinism (i.e., the thesis of compatibilism) is false but, nonetheless, compatibilistic freedom *might* describe some or even most, but not *all*, of human choices.

Interestingly, Bignon does not interact with the primary definitions of libertarianism that I seek to defend. The first is what is referred to as sourcehood libertarian freedom, according to which (as I say in my book), “libertarian freedom always refers to source agency without any ultimate external deterministic cause” (p. 4). The second definition of libertarian freedom is “stronger” and often “referred to as a ‘leeway-based approach’ . . . or an ‘alternative possibilities approach.’”⁶ As I noted on the fourth page of my book, one of the goals (at least whenever possible) was to argue for the stronger definition of libertarian freedom. I phrased it as follows: “The categorical ability to choose among a range of alternative options, each of which is consistent or compatible with one’s nature.” It could also be expressed as follows: “The ability to choose among a range of alternative options, each of which is compatible with the agent’s nature at the moment of choice, and the antecedent conditions are insufficient to causally determine the agent’s choice.”⁷

A brief comment regarding the word “ability.” Often, when discussing these issues with compatibilists, waters are quickly muddied and interlocutors talk past each other because they mean different things by “ability.” There are several manners in which one can use the word. For

⁴ Jonathan Thompson pointed out to me that Bignon seems to be “defining himself to victory.”

⁵ It can also be expressed in the following manner: “The former says that all things about humanity are causally determined by external factors, and the latter says that some, but not all, things about humanity are causally determined by external factors.”

⁶ Kevin Timpe, *Leeway vs. Sourcehood Conceptions of Free Will* (for the Routledge Companion to Free Will)

⁷ Tyson James recommended this formulation in personal correspondence.

example, we may distinguish between *narrow ability* (which focuses solely on one's nature) and *broad ability* (which focuses on both one's nature and one's circumstances related to a certain narrow ability).⁸ Accordingly, for some person *p* and action *a*, to say that "*p* has the narrow ability to perform *a*" is to say that *p*'s nature implies that *p* can perform *a* given that *p* is in the right circumstances (i.e., circumstances that are conducive to *p*'s performing *a*). And to say that "*p* has the broad ability to perform *a*" is to say that (i) *p* has the narrow ability to perform *a* and (ii) *p*'s circumstances allow, or are conducive to, *p*'s performing *a* (or, in simple terms, *p* has the opportunity to perform *a*). So, for example, I have the narrow ability to play the bass guitar; however, since I have no bass guitar in my current vicinity, I do not have the broad ability to actually slap a funky bass line at the current moment. With this in mind, although I possess the narrow ability to play the bass guitar, if God supernaturally causally determined (hereafter simply "determined") all bass guitars to vanish from the face of the earth, then, although I could still play the bass (if things were determined to be different), I would lack the broad ability (or opportunity) to play the bass.⁹ It seems intuitive that in this situation, I could not be blamed (in a desert sense)¹⁰ for not playing the bass guitar in the church band this Sunday morning as there would be no opportunity for me to do otherwise.

Similarly, if God determines Sally to affirm a false belief, then she does not have the broad ability (opportunity) to infer a better or true belief, even if she has the narrow ability to do this. If Sally has had all opportunities to infer true beliefs blocked off or locked away from her access, it seems that she should not be blamed for her affirmation of a false belief (including affirmations of false theological beliefs which lead to eternal punishment). Bottom line: when I use the word "ability," I am referring to an agent's broad ability, and not to their narrow ability, to perform some action. If this opportunity (broad ability) is determined to be unavailable to an agent, then the agent cannot be held rationally or morally responsible for not seizing the opportunity.

With this clarification in place, the problem that Bignon and other (divine) determinists face, I believe, is the following. Some things or broad abilities, such as a certain sense of the property of *being rational* (or the broad ability to be rational), require the broad ability or opportunity to do otherwise than what one does. For example, in one sense (or in some cases), *making a rational decision* seems, at least to me, to require (or entail) that one, simultaneously, has (i) the broad ability to choose an option, *O*, that is good in light of certain evidence *and* (ii) the broad ability to choose an option, not-*O*, that is bad and goes against the evidence.¹¹ However, exhaustive determinism/compatibilism prevents the simultaneously possessing of such broad abilities, since such a situation involves the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP). But this, in turn, implies that we cannot have the broad ability to make a rational decision (as understood above) *even if* we have the narrow ability to make a rational decision.

⁸ Jacobus Erasmus encouraged me to make the distinction between "narrow" and "broad" abilities.

⁹ Christopher Evan Franklin provides further clarity regarding the different uses of the word "ability" and the importance of understanding it as the "Principal of Reasonable Opportunity." See his book, *A Minimal Libertarianism: Free Will and the Promise of Reduction* (Oxford, Oxford Press, 2018), 42.

¹⁰ The notion of deserving praise or blame for performing (or not performing) an action.

¹¹ Why would this occur? Perhaps one fails to think carefully (when the opportunity to exercise carefulness was available) due to laziness, distraction, lack of focus, apathy, or one's opposing greatest subjective desires (to be discussed later). Franklin discusses the "opportunity to be more careful" in *Minimal Libertarianism*, 44.

Bignon's next objection concerns my distinction between exhaustive and non-exhaustive determinism/compatibilism:

But then Stratton suggests several times that compatibilists can agree that humans (sometimes) have libertarian freedom: "Indeed, given the above definition of libertarianism, both compatibilists and libertarians might affirm that some form of libertarian freedom at least occasionally corresponds to reality." That's incoherent. Libertarianism entails incompatibilism, therefore compatibilists cannot affirm that anyone has or ever had or ever will have "libertarian" free will. That would require incompatibilism to be true, and hence compatibilism to be false (p. 7-8).

Of course, it is incoherent to say that (i) all free actions are compatible with determinism *and* (ii) some free actions are incompatible with determinism. Fortunately, that is not my claim, and I talk instead of "*exhaustive* divine determinism" and "*limited* libertarian freedom." I am simply accommodating the view that some free actions might be compatible with determinism while other free actions are not, and I propose that both the labels "compatibilism" and "libertarian" might be used, in a rather loose sense, to apply to those who hold this view. Sure, Bignon might complain that no one else has discussed these issues in this manner in the current literature. Be that as it may, I am suggesting an alternative and logically consistent way of thinking about things—the way things just might be.

Historical Eisegeses

I spent close to half of the book surveying historical theology. I was happy to see that Bignon endorsed my chapter reviewing the work pertaining to libertarian freedom on the part of Thomas Aquinas. One might find it interesting to note that I spilled more ink regarding Aquinas than I did Molina. Regarding Aquinas, Bignon and I agree: Aquinas says, "a number of things that best fits with libertarianism" (p. 13). This agreement, however, is where the lovefest ends. Indeed, Bignon accused me of "historical eisegeses" (p. 17).

Recall the goal of my book. I first offered several definitions of libertarian freedom with a focus on sourcehood freedom and an ability to choose between or among a range of alternative options each of which is compatible with one's nature at a given moment. If any of the great theologians of the past made claims that seemed to align with these definitions, then it seems fair to say that at least occasionally, they explicitly or implicitly affirmed that humanity possesses libertarian freedom. I made it clear that these theological thinkers of the past may have been determinists regarding soteriological matters, but that to them, there was nothing incoherent with the notion that human salvation can be determined by God, and that humans still possess libertarian freedom in matters other than salvation. Not only do some Reformed theologians hold that view today, it seems that Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin may have held that view centuries ago.

Bignon begins this section with the accusation of historical revisionism in order to keep Augustine a libertarian (in his latter years) when it comes to non-salvation issues. Indeed, Bignon exclaims: "Augustine sure sounds like a determinist, and it's no surprise that Calvin quotes him constantly, or that modern-day Calvinists are often said to hold the "Augustinian" view" (p.12).

But Calvin (along with Luther and Melancthon as well as other Calvinists surveyed in my book) do not all seem to assume EDD—exhaustive divine determinism.¹² So, since Augustine did not make this clear, we cannot conclude that Augustine was thinking along the lines of Edwards instead of Luther, Calvin, or other Reformed thinkers today (albeit a minority). I agree with Bignon that Augustine “reconsidered” his view of freedom when it came to soteriological matters. Indeed, he “sure sounds like a determinist” when it comes to salvation issues. But as I explain in my book, it is a huge extrapolation to affirm that *some* things are causally determined, to then jump to the conclusion that “*all* things are causally determined.”

We ought not place words in the mouth of Augustine (or metaphysical commitments in his mind). Given the available data, at least what I surveyed, Augustine never explicitly affirmed a metaphysical commitment to *exhaustive* divine determinism.

Bignon noted that I said “for Pelagius free will meant the ability to do what was right and good. This must be seen and understood as his reaction to Augustine’s determinism” (p.62). Bignon, then, asks the question: “Isn’t that exactly Stratton’s view that when a sinner freely sins, his free will means he had ‘the ability to do what was right and good’ instead? In ‘opposition to Augustine’s determinism?’” (p. 13)

Not necessarily! As I explain in my book, a sinner might not have the ability to choose not to sin, but he could still freely choose between a range of alternative options each of which is compatible with his sin nature. For example, why think that an unregenerate sinner could not choose between the range of alternative crimes: to rob the bank or rob the liquor store? Moreover, why assume that he could not stay home and fantasize about robbing the bank or liquor store? Each option is sinful and compatible with an unregenerate’s nature (not to mention a Christian’s regenerated nature).

Moving ahead, Bignon objects to my suggestion that Luther may not have been an exhaustive divine determinist:

How does Stratton rescue Luther’s alleged libertarianism in response to this? He doesn’t. He just separately notes that Luther is ok with the use of the term “free will” for non-soteriological matters (or “matters below”), because we’re not enslaved to one side when making mundane decisions, in the way Luther sees us enslaved to sin when making decisions in response to divine commandments (p.14).

Recall that I defined libertarian freedom and then showed that Luther seemed to affirm something quite similar when it came to things which he described as “matter below.” And if there is not a significant difference, why would these Reformed theologians go to such lengths to note the distinction between the “matters above” and the “matters below”? Indeed, I am not the first scholar to reach these conclusions. Kirk MacGregor writes:

¹² Calvin seemed open to libertarian freedom regarding the “matters below” and also seems to affirm the libertarian freedom of Adam before the fall (See Calvin’s *Institutes* 1.15.8). If man ever possesses libertarian freedom, and God is still sovereign over these free actions, Molinism seems to be the only game in town (See, *Mere Molinism*, p. 253).

Hence Molina opposed the doctrine that may be styled the theological version of compatibilist human freedom, or the freedom to choose between the options compatible with one's nature. Advanced by Luther and Calvin, this doctrine held that unregenerate humans, while possessing the freedom to choose between opposites in the physical realm (in matters below), lack the ability to choose between spiritual good and evil (in matters above) due to original sin.¹³

William Lane Craig has recently made similar claims:

Martin Luther, for example, held that human beings are, as he put it, free in things below but bound in things above. That is to say, Luther was willing to grant that human beings have freedom of the will with respect to earthly affairs, for example, the decision to shop at Publix instead of at Trader Joe's. But, when it comes to things above (that is to say, spiritual matters), man's sinfulness has bound his will, so that man is not free to choose for God and to appropriate his grace. Rather, redemption must come entirely from God's side. It is God who chooses and saves whom he wills.¹⁴

And lest one think I only reference Molinists, consider the words of Reformed theologian, Richard Muller (found in Chapter 8 of my book):

Not a few of the proponents and critics of the Reformed doctrine of free choice and divine willing have confused the specifically soteriological determination of the Reformed doctrine of predestination with a 'divine determinism of all human actions...'¹⁵

Make no mistake, I am not appealing to authority to conclude, "therefore, I'm right!" Rather, I am simply noting that I stand in good company and that if Bignon is going to charge me with "historical eisegesis," I expect to see him write stern rebukes against all other scholars who have reached similar conclusions. There is no logical contradiction between the propositions, "Soteriological matters are causally determined by God," and "humans possess libertarian freedom regarding some issues not pertaining to salvation matters." The words of Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin all seem to imply (or are at least open) to the idea that both propositions are true, and Augustine does not argue otherwise (or so it seems to me).

Bignon responds:

The problem is that the only way to hold this view coherently is to deny that those determined actions that pertain to salvation are morally responsible. That's because if any of our mundane choices are made with libertarian free will, then it means libertarianism is true, which means incompatibilism is true, and hence any given action cannot be both directly free and determined (p. 18).

¹³ Kirk R. MacGregor, *Luis de Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2015), 50.

¹⁴ See William Lane Craig's *Defender's Podcast*: <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/doctrine-of-god-part-1/doctrine-of-man-part-26/>

¹⁵ Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 222-223.

This seems to be a blind spot. To reiterate, it is logically possible for the majority of the universe to be causally determined. Indeed, it's even possible for the majority of human choices to be described as causally determined and yet "compatibilistically free." Be that as it may, it does not follow that the entire universe is deterministic, and neither does it follow that everything about humanity is exhaustively causally determined. This wild leap is unnecessary. Why can it not be the case that quantum indeterminacy occasionally describes reality or that humans occasionally possess the opportunity to exercise the ability to choose between a range of alternative options each compatible with an "image of God" nature at that moment (even though a majority of the time this opportunity is not available, and thus, there is only one choice option available)?

Let's move the discussion to what I take to be one of the most important topics under dispute.

Philosophical Objections

Although I am a mere theologian and not a professional philosopher, Chapter 12 of my book aims to offer philosophical or metaphysical reasons to think humanity possesses libertarian freedom (either sourcehood libertarian freedom alone, or perhaps even the ability—the opportunity to exercise this ability—to choose between alternative options each compatible with human nature at the moment of choice). This goal is primarily attained by way of deductive arguments (a family of syllogisms I refer to as the "FreeThinking Arguments"), and a thought experiment. I begin by quickly discussing Peter van Inwagen's famous *Consequence Argument* to provide context for the FreeThinking Argument by offering my own theological version of what follows if the CA is applied to EDD:

If [exhaustive divine] determinism is true, then our thoughts beliefs, [evaluations, intuitions, judgements], and behaviors are ultimately the consequences of God's will and acts of causation. But it is not *up to us* what God wills or what he has caused. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our own thoughts, beliefs, [evaluations, intuitions, judgements], and behaviors) are not *up to us* (p. 163).¹⁶

Speaking of intuitions, surely most will find it obvious that if God causally determines one to judge an argument as "bad" (even if it is actually a sound argument), then one should not be held responsible (in a desert sense) for what God has causally determined (in one way or another).

Bignon objects that I do not defend the Consequence Argument (CA) from any of the objections in the literature and claims that I have "abandoned the battlefield" (p. 19). But that was not the point. My purpose for sharing the CA was simply to show that if God causally determines an agent to affirm a false belief, then the agent is powerless to do anything but affirm a false belief.

To be clear, I am not "abandoning any battlefields." Rather, I am picking a new fight against exhaustive determinism (either naturalistic or theological). It seems to me that with the word "exhaustive" in mind, things start to become clear. It also seems to me that many inadvertently borrow ideas from libertarian freedom to argue for EDD. But if libertarian freedom is inadvertently smuggled into reality (even a little bit), then EDD is false.

¹⁶ The bracketed words "evaluations, intuitions, and judgements" are added for clarity.

On another note, I wrote a 300-page book surveying biblical data, historical theology, metaphysics, epistemology, perfect being theology, and apologetics. I only had one chapter to devote to a philosophical defense of libertarian freedom. Thus, I did not have the time or space to survey potential objections (of which I am aware and which I believe do not scathe the FreeThinking Argument).¹⁷

Speaking of my book, I quoted philosopher Jerry Walls who communicated the fact that libertarian freedom seems to be a “basic moral intuition,” and that he does “not believe there are any relevant moral convictions more basic than this one that could serve as premises to prove it” (p.164). Bignon retorts that if libertarian freedom (in the PAP sense) “cannot be supported by arguments with more basic premises,” then this must invalidate my entire chapter aimed at offering philosophical arguments for libertarian free will understood as the “categorical ability to choose between several options” (p. 19).

To be clear, I do believe that the principle of alternative possibilities (PAP) is a properly basic belief (not to mention sourcehood libertarian freedom). That is to say, one is justified or warranted—apart from argument—in believing that someone or something else is not causally determining all of one’s thoughts all the time, and that they possess an opportunity to exercise an ability to choose between an alternative range of options each of which is compatible with one’s nature at a given moment (in the actual world). It is properly basic to believe that all of one’s thoughts are not causally determined by a deity of deception. It is properly basic to believe that every time one affirms a false belief, they had an opportunity to exercise an ability to infer a better and true belief. However, as it works in philosophy (so I’m told), as soon as someone offers a potential defeater, now we’re off to the races with additional arguments for libertarian freedom. Similarly, just as I believe that one can have a properly basic belief in the existence of God apart from argument (à la Plantinga), that does not mean that we cannot offer arguments concluding: “Therefore, God exists” (Plantinga offers a couple dozen or so).¹⁸

Bignon objects:

From then on, Stratton’s comments get really scattered. He leaves the Consequence Argument completely behind, doesn’t interact with any of my further responses to it, and instead says that “strikingly,” I make a “candid” admission that is “quite significant,” when I say that...libertarian free will is incompatible with determinism! This is just embarrassing (p. 20).

I’m sorry if I embarrassed Bignon as that was not my intent (excuse my attempt at humor). The reason why I found his own words “significant” is because with them he has made the job of the “limited libertarian”—showing that EDD/compatibilism does not *always* describe reality—quite easy. All a libertarian has to do at this point is show that at least occasionally, humans are either not causally determined by something or someone else, or show that humans, at the moment of

¹⁷ I am currently in the beginning phases of discussing the possibility of co-authoring a new book with a bona-fide philosopher which aims to offer a rigorous philosophical defense of the FreeThinking Argument. Stay tuned!

¹⁸ Jerry R. Walls and Trent Dougherty, *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018).

choice, possess an opportunity to exercise an ability to choose among a range of alternative options each of which is compatible with one's nature. That's exactly what I do.

Bignon claims that I took him out of context which "distorts its meaning a bit." He writes: "I had said that the Consequence Argument establishes what I 'happily concede, namely that libertarian free will is incompatible with determinism, but falls short of refuting compatibilism'" (p. 20).

I apologize if this was out of context, but if it's true that libertarian freedom is incompatible with determinism, and that compatibilism entails *exhaustive* determinism, then all one has to do is provide one argument concluding: "Therefore, libertarian freedom exists." I offer several. With that said, as noted above, I do not think this needs to rule out determinism simpliciter. All it does is show that EDD is false or that the "thesis of compatibilism" does not *always* describe reality. As my book explains, there is a vital difference between granting that free will might be compatible with determinism, and saying that this view of freedom and determinism actually *always* describes the way things are. I'm primarily concerned with the latter.

Consider the way I reformulated the CA above with exhaustive divine determinism in mind. How can a human be blamed (in a desert sense) or held accountable if God causally determines the manner in which he or she thinks, judges, or guides a behavior or anything else? If the CA can be summed up this way when considering EDD, it seems to me that there is not an escape route for the compatibilist. After all, even with "guidance control" in mind, if the way an agent chooses to "guide" is causally determined by God, then it was not "up to" the agent. God causally determined exactly how the agent "guides." This includes how the agent thinks of and about all things (even when he is completely wrong). However, if there is anything about an agent that is not causally determined by something or someone else, then this person possesses sourcehood libertarian freedom (if not a leeway ability).

Bignon often appeals to the "guidance control" offered by Fischer and Ravizza.¹⁹ I fail to see how this helps the advocate of EDD because, if this so-called "guidance control" is not causally determined by God (or anything or anyone else), then one with "guidance control" is free in the libertarian sense to guide. Be that as it may, if God is the one causally determining the exact manner in which one "guides," then one has not solved any problems. If EDD is true, then God guides (causally determines) our "guidance" control. There is nothing ultimately *up to* us if all things are causally determined by God. We are nothing but passive cogs ("dust in the wind") as opposed to active agents. Epistemologist, John DePoe, has recently supported this case by exposing this problem:

From the traditional view of humanity, epistemology must address the role of personal agency to avoid dehumanizing the human agent as nothing more than a mundane relata in the cause-and-effect machinery of the world. . . ultimately the human agent is downgraded from being a person with active powers of rationality to a passive cog that is at the mercy of causes beyond one's control . . .²⁰

¹⁹ See John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

²⁰ John M. DePoe (edited by Tyler Dalton McNabb), *Debating Christian Religious Epistemology: An Introduction to Five Views on the Knowledge of God*, (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020)

Reformed Epistemology (proper functionalism) without qualification seems non-problematic. However, once Reformed Epistemology is married to EDD, then the implication of this view is that we are relegated to nothing but “passive cogs” lacking active powers (or broad abilities) of rationality to infer or affirm better or true beliefs. We can only hope and assume that our determined beliefs are true (and this “hope” and “assumption” is causally determined by factors beyond our control as well). This also raises more questions about God’s nature that are discussed later in my book. I will discuss these problems below.

As I made clear in my book, I am not opposed to many or most things about the universe—even humanity—being causally determined. I simply argue that not all things about humanity are causally determined. I note that if one sound argument against determinism is offered, then exhaustive divine causal determinism should be rejected. Bignon retorts:

How is that astonishing? If the libertarian offers one sound argument for libertarianism, then determinism and compatibilism are false. Of course, that’s how arguments work. But the same is also obviously true for the opposing view: if compatibilists offer a single sound argument for compatibilism, then libertarianism is false. None of this is remarkable, and none of this is the result of my “admission” (p. 20).

Bignon seems to miss the point of what I am arguing for in my book. “If the libertarian offers one sound argument for libertarianism, then [exhaustive divine] determinism [is false] and compatibilism [does not always describe reality].” With that in mind, determinism could describe many or most things about the universe and humanity. However, “if compatibilists offer a single sound argument [showing that] compatibilism [describes some instances of the human experience, it does not logically follow that] libertarianism is always false (that it never describes an instance of reality).” Since Bignon is devoted to the cause of compatibilism, and he claims that the word “exhaustive” is entailed when stating that compatibilism describes reality, then two simple premises are enough to show that his view of compatibilism is false.

This brings us to the *FreeThinking Argument* and mad scientists.

The point of what some have called the “*Strattonian Mad Scientist Thought Experiment*” is to demonstrate that if something or someone else is always causally determining all of your beliefs all the time, then you stand in no epistemic position to know if your thoughts and beliefs are any good—let alone true. In fact, an undercutting defeater (against the reliability of the view) stands against the view. All you can do is assume your beliefs (which would not be based upon your guidance/thinking and are not “up to you”) are good or true, but those assumptions are not even up to you—something or someone else causally determined you to commit this fallacious error (and the “how” of this causal determinism is irrelevant). It is simply not your fault.

With this in mind, suppose a mad scientist exhaustively controls (causally determines) all of Sally’s thoughts and beliefs all the time.²¹ This includes exactly *what* Sally thinks of and about and exactly *how* Sally thinks of and about it. All of Sally’s thoughts about her beliefs and all of

²¹ Thoughts include: intuitions, “seemings,” evaluations, assessments, judgements, etc. If it helps, we can even suppose that the scientist created “android Sally.”

Sally's beliefs about her thoughts are caused and determined by the mad scientist. All evaluations and judgements Sally assumes are *up to her*, are actually causally determined by the nefarious neurosurgeon. This also includes the next words that will form in Sally's head and come out of her mouth.

Question: How can Sally (not the mad scientist) rationally affirm the current thoughts and beliefs in her head as good, bad, better, the best, worse, the worst, true, false, probably true, or probably false (note the range of alternative options) without begging the question?

This seems to be an impossible task for a "passive cog." And replacing the nefarious neurosurgeon with a deity of deception does not magically make this big problem disappear. Since begging the question is logically fallacious, anything Sally claims to think or know is not based upon justification, but rather, logical fallacies. Any argument based on a logical fallacy is no argument at all. This is one reason to affirm premise (3) of the *FreeThinking Argument Against Naturalism*. Here it is as offered on page 167 of my book:

- A1- If naturalism is true, human nature does not include an immaterial soul.
- A2- If human nature does not include an immaterial soul, then humans do not possess libertarian freedom.
- A3- If humans do not possess libertarian freedom, then humans do not possess the ability to rationally infer and rationally affirm knowledge claims.
- A4- Humans do possess the ability to rationally infer and rationally affirm knowledge claims.
- A5- Therefore, humans possess libertarian freedom.
- A6- Therefore, human nature includes an immaterial soul.
- A7- Therefore, naturalism is false.

It seems that people typically reject the idea that something or someone other than them (what one refers to as "I") is ultimately responsible for and causally determining all of their thoughts, evaluations, assessments, and judgements (the "powers of reflective self-control").²² Furthermore, if one's beliefs are determined by one's evaluations, assessments, and judgements, then all of one's beliefs would ultimately be determined by something or someone else as well. This common rejection of exhaustive determinism can be expressed in the following manner:

- 1- If I do not possess libertarian freedom, then something or someone else is ultimately responsible for *all* of my thoughts and beliefs.
- 2- I am ultimately responsible (in a desert sense) for *some* of my thoughts and beliefs.
- 3- Therefore, I possess libertarian freedom.

²² Christopher Evan Franklin describes the powers of reflective self-control to include the capacities of evaluations, assessments, and decisions in light of those assessments. He also argues that one needs the opportunities to exercise these capacities in various manners—including a manner in which the agent does not actually exercise these capacities. He notes that if determinism is true, then an agent can only exercise these capacities in the way the agent actually does. Therefore, if determinism is true, then agents lack the opportunity to exercise the capacity in any other way. Franklin describes this nicely with Taylor Cyr and Matt Flummer on *The Free Will Show (Episode 11)*: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-11-libertarianism-part-1-event-causal-christopher/id1525456786?i=1000505051937>

Most people believe that they are indeed rationally and/or morally responsible (in a desert sense) for at least some of their thoughts and beliefs. It is easy to show why the first premise does not allow this mental responsibility on any paradigm assuming exhaustive determinism which relegates human agency to nothing but a “passive cog.” Here’s another way to formulate the core of the FreeThinking Argument:

- 1- If exhaustive determinism is true, then we have no reason to trust our rational faculties.
- 2- We do have reason to trust our rational faculties.
- 3- Therefore, exhaustive determinism is false.

Here’s one more to consider:

- 1- If humans do not possess the powers of reflective self-control, then humans are not rationally responsible.
- 2- Humans are rationally responsible.
- 3- Therefore, humans possess the powers of reflective self-control (libertarian freedom).²³

On a side note: consider a “Pascal’s Wager for Freedom” (I believe my colleague Leighton Flowers first offered something like this): If I’m wrong about this topic (and determinists are right), it is because God causally determined the determinists to be correct and God causally determined me to affirm a false belief. If this is the case, I have no opportunity to choose, think, judge, or believe otherwise. I do not determine *what* I think if God causally determines *how* I think. It is fair to say, it seems to me, that I am not responsible (I do not deserve blame) for being causally determined by God to think incorrectly.

Be that as it may, if the determinist is wrong, it is the determinist’s fault and he deserves blame! He should have been more careful, examined his biases more closely (like his greatest subjective desires), and chosen—even if EDD is his greatest desire—to reject incoherent thoughts and beliefs in favor of truth. Instead, Bignon freely chooses to stand as an obstacle in the way of an argument that actually leads people to Christ and/or strengthens the faith of believers.²⁴ That is to say, if I am wrong, I am not blameworthy. If the determinist is wrong, he is to blame. With this in mind, consider the following syllogism:

- 1- If God causally determines Jack to affirm and advance false theological beliefs, then God is not a maximally great being.
- 2- God is a maximally great being.
- 3- Therefore, God does not causally determine Jack to affirm and advance false theological beliefs (that’s Jack’s fault).

Why is this “Jack’s fault?” Consider the words of epistemologist Kelly Fitzsimmons Burton:

. . . human beings are without excuse for failing to see what is clear to reason. This assumes that humans are rational beings and CAN use reason if they want [choose]

²³ For more on the libertarian “powers of reflective self-control,” see Franklin, *Minimal Libertarianism*, 40.

²⁴ See, *Evidence in the Flesh for Apologetics*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/evidence-in-the-flesh-for-apologetics/>

to. Rationality at this level assumes free will in the sense of liberty to think critically at the basic level. We are always free to use reason to critically analyze our basic beliefs.²⁵

But on Bignon's EDD view, one is not free to evaluate or judge any of his beliefs including those at the basic level because God causally determines exactly how one thinks about these issues, what one believes is correct, and what false beliefs one will happily affirm. That is to say, if God causally determines a person to fail to see what is clear to reason, then it is impossible for this person to see the truth (that seems to be a good excuse). A question I hope Bignon answers (without begging the question) is this: If it is impossible for Bignon to exercise an ability to judge otherwise, how does he know that he shouldn't have judged otherwise?

Bignon writes:

The contested . . . premise [of the FreeThinking Argument is] called (A3) on page 167: "If humans do not possess libertarian freedom, then humans do not possess the ability to rationally infer and rationally affirm knowledge claims" . . . So, what justification does Stratton provide in support of that disputed conditional? . . . Stratton makes 7 identifiable claims. He says:

1. that deliberation requires free will and it's obvious we have libertarian free will when we choose between options...

To be clear: Many (most?) people seem to think that libertarian freedom is properly basic, but as I noted above, that does not mean that it is not something which can also be concluded via logical argumentation. I do offer reasons to think that we must possess metaphysical access to alternative evaluative judgement options (EJOs), and reasons to conclude that our thoughts are not always causally determined by something or someone else, but I do not think that one must have access to these arguments to be warranted in their belief that their thoughts are not causally determined by someone else.

2. that using rationality to refute his argument would be self-defeating as it would tacitly support the argument...

True.

3. that determinism removes our ability to "think otherwise," or our access to alternate possible beliefs [evaluations, or judgements] ...

Yes. If something beyond your control determines you to affirm a false belief, then it is impossible in this circumstance for you (lacking the broad ability) to infer better or true beliefs. Sure, other possible worlds exist, but we are discussing the actual world that God created.

4. that on determinism, our beliefs are not "up to us," or are "outside of our control," or are "forced" on us...

²⁵ Kelly Fitzsimmons Burton, *A Rational Presupposition Approach to Free Will*: <https://freethinkingministries.com/a-rational-presuppositional-approach-to-free-will/>

Yes, if EDD is true, then God causally determines all of our thoughts and beliefs (even our bad thoughts and false beliefs). We would have no opportunity to exercise an ability to think or believe otherwise in the actual world on this view.

5. that God on determinism is relevantly analogous to a mad scientist controlling us and choosing our beliefs for us (which would exclude knowledge) ...

Yes, if EDD is true, then the same rationality problems that arise with a nefarious neurosurgeon will also arise for the exhaustive divine determinist.

6. that on determinism, our cognitive faculties are not aimed at truth...

Some clarification is needed here. Our cognitive faculties *could* be aimed at truth if EDD is true. But I merely point out that they are not *always* aimed at truth if EDD is true in the actual world. If our cognitive faculties are not always aimed at truth, then in some sense they are not reliable. At the least, they are not *always* reliable and we would not stand in a position to know when we can trust them and when we cannot. If atheistic naturalism is true, then our cognitive faculties are determined by the non-thinking forces and past events of nature. They are not “aimed at truth.”

7. that the truth of “indirect doxastic voluntarism” (the thesis that we are sufficiently in control of some of our beliefs to be judged for them) requires our having libertarian free will. As we will see, it’s a mixed bag: some of these are deeply confused, and some of them raise pretty good questions.

That might be the nicest thing Bignon has said to me all day! Bignon turns his attention to a five-step syllogism I offered called the *Deliberation and Liberation Argument*:

1. Rationality requires deliberation.
2. Deliberation requires libertarian freedom (liberation).
3. Therefore, rationality requires libertarian freedom (liberation).
4. Some humans are rational.
5. Therefore, some humans possess libertarian freedom.

I note the obvious: this syllogism hinges upon the definition of “deliberation.” I offer the following from Webster: “*To weigh in the mind; to consider and examine the reasons for and against a measure; to estimate the weight of force of arguments, or the probable consequences of a measure, in order to a choice or decision; to pause and consider.*”

Bignon responds that this definition is “entirely acceptable by the compatibilist, and perfectly compatible with determinism” (p. 23).

Is that true? Not with the “broad ability” (opportunities to exercise various abilities) in which we are discussing in mind. Consider the next words from my book:

The question, then, that *The Deliberation and Liberation Argument* raises is this: “Is it possible to truly deliberate without libertarian freedom?” A person can readily see how this creates a difficult dilemma for those who believe in exhaustive determinism, because their philosophy compels them to reply that the non-rational laws of nature and past events, or God, always exhaustively determine a person’s considerations, examinations, and estimations. In other words, the evaluative thoughts a person may *feel* are governing his deliberations are actually caused and determined by things (or persons) external to him. He is making no decision; it was made for him! And if that is the case, then the person cannot rationally affirm, justify, or provide any warrant that his beliefs are in fact true (including his belief that determinism is true). It would seem, then, that libertarian freedom is necessary if one genuinely is to possess the ability to evaluate his thoughts/beliefs and to deliberate in the truest sense. And it would follow, then, that a person is (at least occasionally) free to choose what he ultimately believes by way of his self-controlled, free thinking (p. 170).

To clarify: if God causally determines Sally to affirm a false belief, and God (the same supernatural deity of deception that causally determines Sally to believe incorrectly) also causally determines exactly how Sally evaluates and judges said belief, then how can Sally rationally affirm that her belief is any good at all or true? I’d love to hear how one can accomplish this task without begging the question (which would not be a rational affirmation).

Bignon responds by pointing out that I do say that “deliberating and evaluating options require ‘free will,’ but that I still ‘presuppose that free will is incompatible with determinism. . .’” (p. 23)

However, I show the problem that arises from *exhaustive* determinism. If something other than you determines that you affirm a false belief, then you cannot infer the best explanation or true beliefs (alternative EJOs are blocked off and locked away from you—including the truth)! Thus, unless you are infallible, you need libertarian freedom (not being causally determined via an external force) in order to have a broad ability—the opportunity—to reject bad and false beliefs in favor of better or true beliefs.

Bignon writes:

. . . as evidenced by a handful of false dilemmas: [Stratton] says “the evaluative thoughts a person may feel are governing his deliberations are actually caused and determined by things (or persons) external to him.” Calvinists affirm both horns are true.

Not all Calvinists affirm this (I offer examples of Calvinists who do not affirm this in my book). Nevertheless, Bignon affirms that on EDD, God is determining the judgments, assessments, evaluations, considerations, and estimations that arise in one’s head. It is vital to see that, on Bignon’s own view, he is not the source of any “guidance of thought”—God causally determines the entire show! We are nothing but “passive cogs” at the mercy of factors beyond our control if EDD is true. This seems to validate my argument. I point out the following in my book:

... determinists (if correct) would not have come to their conclusion about determinism based on their intelligence or by choosing to examine the evidence to infer the best

explanation. Rather, their very conclusion about determinism would simply be determined by external factors (p.169).

Bignon now turns his sights on the words of William Lane Craig which I quoted in my book:

There is a sort of dizzying, self-defeating character to determinism. For if one comes to believe that determinism is true, one has to believe that the reason he has come to believe it is simply that he was determined to do so. One has not in fact been able to **weigh the arguments pro and con** and freely make up one's mind on that basis. The difference between the person who weighs the arguments for determinism and rejects them and the person who weighs them and accepts them is wholly that one was determined by causal factors outside himself to believe and the other not to believe. When you come to realize that your decision to believe in determinism was itself determined and that even your present realization of that fact right now is likewise determined, a sort of vertigo sets in, for everything that you think, even this very thought itself, is outside your control. Determinism could be true; but it is very hard to see how it could ever be rationally affirmed, since its affirmation undermines the rationality of its affirmation.²⁶

Bignon claims that this is a "false dilemma" but he doesn't explain why. Perhaps he means that the narrow ability to deliberate is compatible with determinism; however, we are concerned with the broad ability to deliberate. Nevertheless, Bignon continues:

... so we would need an argument to support the claim that it has to be either one or the other. Instead, Stratton tells us it's obvious: "it seems intuitively obvious that humans possess libertarian freedom and make real choices after deliberating among a range of genuinely available options (at least occasionally)" (p.169).

Yes, it does seem intuitively obvious to me and, I think, to most people. Surely, if you ask the average person if all of their thoughts and beliefs are determined by a mad scientist they will look at you as if you're crazy. If you tell them to replace the mad scientist with a deity of deception (even if he has "morally sufficient reasons"), they will continue to give you the same look. If you replace this deity with physics and chemistry, the glare typically continues.

Nonetheless, not only did I say that it *seems* obvious that our thoughts and beliefs are not always determined by something else, I also offered arguments in support of this claim. Bottom line: if an agent is causally determined to judge a proposition in a certain manner, it follows that all other alternative EJOs are metaphysically blocked off and locked away from the agent's access. If an agent does not possess the opportunity to decide what he or she should think, the agent stands in no position to know, judge, or rationally affirm that they are, in fact, being causally determined to think and judge correctly.

Moreover, if non-rational physics and chemistry causally determine all thoughts and beliefs, then we have an undercutting defeater against the reliability of our thoughts and beliefs. If a

²⁶ William Lane Craig, *Molinism vs. Calvinism: Troubled by Calvinists*, 2010, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/molism-vs.-calvinism>

supernatural deity of deception (even if he created the universe)²⁷ causally determines ALL thoughts and beliefs ALL the time, and also causally determines ALL humans to happily affirm false theological beliefs, then we have an undercutting defeater against the reliability of our theological thoughts and beliefs.

The word “reliable” in this sense is meant to convey something to the effect of “being trustworthy to consistently allow *the agent* to reach true beliefs.” Reliabilism, in the discipline of epistemology, is a theory that one’s beliefs are only justified when formed via a trustworthy psychological process. That is to say, beliefs are justified iff the belief was produced by a trustworthy process. Elliott Crozat has pointed out some problems with this view:

According to reliabilism, one’s belief is justified iff produced by a reliable psychological process. But what exactly is a reliable psychological process? The standard answer is that a reliable process is one which is truth-conducive. But what does it mean for a process to be truth-conducive? Again, the standard answer is that the process is truth-conducive insofar as it usually produces true beliefs. Now, consider a further question: how often must a process produce true beliefs in order to qualify as truth-conducive? 100% of the time? That would reduce reliabilism to a form of externalist infallibilism, which undercuts the reliabilist’s motivations to avoid infallibilism and skepticism. 99% of the time? That seems too strict. 75% of the time? That seems arbitrary. Why exactly 75%? Why not 74%, or 76%, or some other frequency? Indeed, any specific frequency greater than 50% and less than 100% seems arbitrary.²⁸

With that in mind, consider Thor’s brother from *The Avengers*: if Loki (the “god of mischief”) exhaustively determines (in some form or fashion) all human thoughts and beliefs all the time, then how can this be referred to as a “reliable process?” Indeed, even if Loki determined this process to reach many true beliefs, the “god of mischief” also determines a plethora of false beliefs that the agent is also determined to happily affirm. If that is the case, then how could one rationally affirm that one’s current beliefs regarding this topic do not fall under the category of “causally determined happily affirmed false beliefs?” This seems to be anything but reliable.

Perhaps a real-world example involving the American 2020 election provides a helpful illustration.²⁹ The *reliability* of the Dominion Voting Systems has been called into question. In fact, President Donald Trump tweeted the following on November 12th:

REPORT: DOMINION DELETED 2.7 MILLION TRUMP VOTES NATIONWIDE. DATA ANALYSIS FINDS 221,000 PENNSYLVANIA VOTES SWITCHED FROM PRESIDENT TRUMP TO BIDEN. 941,000 TRUMP VOTES DELETED. STATES USING DOMINION VOTING SYSTEMS SWITCHED 435,000 VOTES FROM TRUMP TO BIDEN.

²⁷ To be clear, I affirm that a Maximally Great Being created the universe.

²⁸ Elliott Crozat, *Are Your Belief Forming Faculties Reliable?* <https://freethinkingministries.com/are-your-belief-forming-faculties-reliable/>

²⁹ This section is lifted from a recent article I wrote on my website called, *Reaching Reliable Beliefs*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/reaching-reliable-beliefs/>

To be clear, I am not taking a position on this political matter. Think of this as nothing but a thought experiment. Allegedly, whistleblowers have come forward claiming that the programming of the Dominion Voting Systems intentionally allows for nefarious activity (even if the majority of the votes are tallied correctly). In a close election, however, a small percentage of incorrectly tallied votes could lead to the affirmation of a false belief regarding who actually won the election of 2020. *Supposing* that these allegations are true (for the mere sake of thought experimentation), even though Dominion might get the majority of votes tallied correctly, Dominion would also be an unreliable system to determine the Presidency.

This thought experiment demonstrates that if the programmer of a system is untrustworthy, then the system itself is not reliable (even if it is typically trustworthy). That is to say, as soon as a nefarious programmer is affirmed, the reliability of the system is called into question.

The “programmer” of human cognitive faculties, however, is anything but nefarious. Indeed, our creator is not a “deity of deception,” a “divine false prophet,” or a “god of mischief.” God, by definition, is a maximally great being.³⁰ With perfect being theology in mind, I contend that a maximally great God would not purposefully/intentionally determine humans to “aim” at or form false theological beliefs every time humans affirm false theological beliefs. Indeed, if EDD is true, then God is literally the ultimate determiner (via direct or secondary causation) of heresy. God would be actively causing (in some form or fashion) people to believe in atheism, Satanism, skepticism, Gnosticism, and radical Islam. Muhammad, then, in an ultimate sense really would have been “commanded” (causally determined) by God. This fundamentally changes the nature of God from Truth itself (John 14:6) to a divine false prophet.³¹

The creator of the universe is not a “divine false prophet” or a “god of mischief.” God is a maximally great being. It follows that God would not always causally determine every false belief. Thus, when you “miss the mark” (i.e., happily affirming false theological beliefs) this is not causally determined by God—it’s your fault (you failed to seize the opportunity to exercise your ability to take your incorrect thoughts captive). Thus, EDD (in any form) is false.

Bignon says that upon reading my book (p. 168-169), he was fascinated to learn that he thinks “human choices are illusory.” Before continuing, he earlier complained that I had taken him out of context. Fair enough. If so, it was unintentional. Bignon, however, given our multiple YouTube exchanges (not to mention the numerous times I make it clear in the same book he is critiquing) knows exactly what I mean when I refer to a “choice.” On multiple occasions, I made it clear that I am referring to the ability to choose among an alternative range of options *each compatible* with one’s nature at the moment of choice. Bignon rejects the ability—the opportunity—to make this kind of a “choice.”

Bignon responds:

³⁰ Anselm’s definition in *Proslogium*, chapter 2: “Lord,...we believe that you are a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.”

³¹ My friend Nick Rock pointed this out to me via personal correspondence.

At the risk of repeating myself, no, libertarian free will is not an illusion: we don't have it, and we don't appear to have it. And free will simpliciter is not an illusion either: we appear to have it, and we do have it. I just say it's compatible with determinism (p. 24).

At the risk of repeating myself, humans typically sense (it's the "common sense view")³² that something or someone else is not causally determining exactly how one thinks and evaluates. It's intuitive that determinism/compatibilism (at least in the EDD sense) is false. Indeed, Fisher and Ravizza note that "we naturally think that there are . . . various paths genuinely open to us . . . we think of ourselves as frequently having alternative possibilities."³³ Michael McKenna is a compatibilist who pulls no punches regarding his own view:

Compatibilism is not an intuitive thesis through and through. It is an odd view that does after all bump up against some of our intuitions. Anyone's experience teaching the free will problem in an introductory philosophy class confirms the point. It is only to be expected that at points compatibilism winds up looking a bit embarrassed when exposed in nothing but its underwear.³⁴

Moreover, humans also typically sense that we possess the opportunity to exercise an ability to think otherwise (to choose among a range of alternative options *each of which is compatible* with our nature at the moment of choice). Christopher Evan Franklin is clear:

The [Principle of Reasonable Opportunity] has great intuitive plausibility. . . I submit that this is a principle that we are inclined to accept upon critical moral reflection. Just as we would find it absurd to blame someone for failing to speak English if he lacked the ability to speak English, we would find it absurd to blame him if he had the ability but lacked the opportunity to exercise it, because, for example, he was gagged.³⁵

If you do, in fact, possess an opportunity to exercise this ability—and if something or someone else is not always causally determining all of your thoughts—then welcome to the land of the free in the libertarian sense! But if we do not possess this ability (if this opportunity is illusory), and there is, in fact, only one "choice option" actually available at the moment of choice, and many are sure we do possess a broad ability to choose otherwise, then humanity is subject to something akin to an illusion (Bignon can call it whatever he'd like).

It's self-refuting to rationally argue against the argument

I stated the following in my book: "if [an agent] does not ever possess the ability to think otherwise regarding anything, then he is merely left assuming his or her determined thoughts are good—let alone true!" (p.179). Bignon responds that "we still haven't moved beyond the equivocation between 'categorical' and 'conditional' senses of the ability to do otherwise."

³² David Pallmann recently encouraged me to appeal to a "common sense view" regarding these issues.

³³ Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, 20.

³⁴ Michael McKenna, *Resisting the Manipulation Argument: A Hard-Liner Takes It on the Chin*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. 89, No. 2 (September 2014) 467-484 (special thanks to Ben Whittington).

³⁵ Franklin, *Minimal Libertarianism*, 45.

This is why I included the key definition (and repeated it throughout the book): “Simply put, libertarian freedom is . . . the ability to choose between or among a range of alternative options each of which is compatible with one’s nature at a given moment” (p. 24). The four key words, “at a given moment,” are meant to describe the actual world and time in which an agent is confronted with the *opportunity* to exercise one’s ability to choose between various options each compatible with human nature.³⁶ Thus, “at a given moment” in the actual world, at the moment of choice, there are a range of various alternative options that are *each compatible* with our image of God nature. If all is causally determined, however, then this range of alternative options is delimited to one and only one metaphysically possible option in the actual world.

Appealing to a “conditional ability,” it seems to me, is merely appealing to a narrow ability, or appealing to another possible world (what God *could* have causally determined to be otherwise), and thus, it would be a different “moment” in which God causally determined something to be different. On this view, it seems that I have the conditional ability to walk on water (just as Peter did) if God causally determined me to walk on water. But in the real and actual world, I do not possess the ability to walk on water. I do however, possess the opportunity to exercise an ability to choose among a range of options each compatible with my nature. For example, I can jump feet first into the water, dive head first into the water, or stay in the boat (or so it seems to me) without conditions being different. If so, then I possess *limited* libertarian freedom.

Here’s the point: If God causally determines me to stay in the boat, then it is impossible for me to exercise my ability to get out of the boat and go for a swim (even though I have the intrinsic (narrow) ability to swim. Similarly, if God causally determines me to happily affirm a false belief, then it is impossible for me to infer a better or true belief (even though I have the intrinsic (narrow) ability to affirm truth—if God causally determines me to do so). And since rational agents are the kinds of beings who can (i.e., possess opportunities to exercise an ability to) reject bad thinking in the actual world, Bignon, according to his view, would not be a rational agent. Fortunately, we are rational agents who can exercise the criterion of carefulness when thinking.³⁷

Bignon quotes me:

Does a person possess the ability to reject irrational thoughts and beliefs in favor of rational thoughts and beliefs? . . . If a person answers “yes” to the above question, then he simultaneously, tacitly affirms libertarian freedom and affirms his ability to choose between options consistent and compatible with his nature (p.175).

He responds to my challenge by claiming that this is a “non sequitur.” I contend that it’s a properly basic belief that “at least some humans do possess the ability to make these evaluative and rational judgments” (p.175). Bignon replies: “Yes. And from it, one doesn’t just get libertarianism without an argument” (p. 27).

³⁶ Recall the illustration I offered above regarding my ability to play the bass guitar without the opportunity to exercise my ability to play the bass guitar.

³⁷ I recommend Kelly Fitzsimmons Burton on this score. She discusses the “carefulness criterion.” This seems to imply the opportunity to exercise an ability to be careful – or not (libertarian freedom). See, *Reason and Proper Function: A Response to Alvin Plantinga* (Phoenix, AZ: Public Philosophy Press, 2019).

But the argument seems to have been ignored. I defend two claims:

- 1- A rational (but fallible) agent must be the *source* of his evaluative thoughts, or he stands in no position to know if a deity of deception (even one with “morally sufficient reasons” to deceive), the forces and past events of nature, a nefarious neurosurgeon, or anything/anyone else is causally determining him or her to evaluate or judge correctly.
- 2- If one is causally determined to be metaphysically closed off and locked away from an alternative range of EJOs, then one possesses no opportunity to evaluate otherwise and cannot do his due diligence to infer the best explanation among competing hypotheses (even though it subjectively *feels* as if the agent does this). Moreover, if it is impossible for a so-called agent to judge otherwise, how can the agent know, justify, or rationally affirm that he or she should not have judged otherwise?

I have offered arguments and thought experiments which make this clear.

Beliefs “outside of our control” or “not up to us” or “forced”

If an agent does not possess an opportunity to exercise an ability to think otherwise, then one’s beliefs that follow from one’s causally determined thoughts are outside of the agent’s control. I make it clear: “if all things are outside of human control, then this includes exactly what every human thinks of and about and exactly *how* each human thinks of and about it” (p.168).

I also referenced William Lane Craig’s use of “outside your control”: “When you come to realize that your decision to believe in determinism was itself determined and that even your present realization of that fact right now is likewise determined, a sort of vertigo sets in, for everything that you think, even this very thought itself, is outside your control” (p.169).

Although any confusion regarding the “ability to do otherwise” has been clarified, Bignon says that “the problem here is quite similar to that with the “ability to do otherwise” (p. 27). He continues: “John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza’s book *Responsibility and Control* . . . distinguished between ‘regulative’ control, and ‘guidance’ control, the latter of which is compatible with determinism” (p. 28).

I don’t think this move is going to help Bignon escape the problems I have raised (at least if he continues to affirm EDD—and the “exhaustive” is vital to grasp here). This is because, as I alluded to above, if EDD always describes all things about reality, then this also entails that God causally determines “your” guidance (note the scare quotes). That is to say, what might subjectively (and incorrectly) feel as “your” guidance is not up to you at all, but determined by God. You are causally determined to think and guide exactly as you think and guide and you possess no opportunity to exercise any ability to think and guide otherwise if EDD is true.

It seems that EDD Calvinists like Bignon agree with libertarian “freedom fighters,” like me, that some aspect of control is necessary to ground responsibility—even if one does not have the control to actually act or behave otherwise. Those affirming this view claim that there are two kinds of control that we must distinguish: *Regulative Control* and *Guidance Control*. Regulative control seems to require the ability to physically act otherwise, but guidance control does not.

Guidance control is enough, they claim, to ground human responsibility even if all physical events are causally determined by God or nature.

A Star Wars Thought Experiment

With that in mind, think about the droid, K-2SO, from the *Star Wars: Rogue One*.³⁸ Consider these to be several different cases from a galaxy far, far, away:³⁹

1- K-2SO was built and programmed by Arakyd Industries to have a “nature” that always thinks, evaluates, judges, chooses, and acts in accordance with the goals of the Empire. K-2 is not responsible for being built by Arakyd Industries and the droid is not responsible for its programmed “Empire nature.” K-2 is even programmed to “like” his programming. K-2 is not responsible for how “he” was programmed.

2- K-2SO was stolen against the droid’s will and “irresistibly” reprogrammed with a new nature that will now always think, evaluate, judge, choose, and act in accordance with the goals of the Rebellion (which are antithetical to the goals of the Empire). K-2 is even programmed by Cassian Andor to “like” his new programming. K-2 is not responsible for how he was reprogrammed. All of K-2’s “thoughts” and actions are causally determined by the nature of “his” programming; none of which was up to the droid (it was causally determined by Andor). K-2 is not responsible for “his” programming or how the programming determines “him” to always think or act.⁴⁰

3- But suppose that somehow K-2 was able to transcend “his” formerly causally determined programmed nature and began to “freely think” and freely choose to act on “his” own. If this is the case, then K-2 possesses libertarian freedom at least as far as thinking goes. Also suppose that Yoda senses a disturbance in the force and knows that K-2 has transcended his programming. Yoda now uses the force (or will use the force if needed) to causally determine all of the physical actions of K-2 to guarantee that these actions only approximate the Rebellion’s goals. (K-2 can think otherwise, but cannot physically act otherwise.)

4- Now suppose that although K-2 has somehow transcended his programmed nature and now possesses the libertarian freedom to think—“he” also freely chooses to act in the exact same manner that Yoda would causally determine the droid to act.

³⁸ I originally offered these “Star Wars Cases” in an article entitled: *Yoda & K-2: Semi-Compatibilism & Responsibility* (2017), <https://freethinkingministries.com/yoda-k-2-semi-compatibilism-responsibility/>

³⁹ A very similar scenario also occurred in *Star Wars: The Mandalorian (Season 1; Chapter 7: The Reckoning)*. The droids K-2SO (Rogue One) and IG-11 (The Mandalorian) were both reprogrammed against the will of their previous programming. K-2SO was reprogrammed by Cassian Andor. IG-11 was reprogrammed by Kuiil the ugnought.

⁴⁰ The Mandalorian (Din Djarin) confuses the actions of droids—or potentially other people—who are merely acting in accord with a nature/programming that is not up to them, but up to something or someone else, as being morally responsible. This is silly and in Season 1; Chapter 7: *The Reckoning*, Kuiil (Nick Nolte’s ugnought) scolds Mando for being so hostile to his reprogrammed droid: “Droids are not good or bad. They are neutral reflections of those who imprint them. . . [if] you trust me, then you will trust my work.” Unlike humans, droids (even possessing programmed and causally determined intentional states of consciousness) are not moral agents—they are machines. These machines simply function based upon the programming imparted by moral agents.

This is an example of the “guidance control” to which Bignon refers. The agent makes free thinking decisions (seemingly in a libertarian sense not causally determined by anything other than the agent) that just so happens to coincide with the only way physical actions could be. However, it is vital to notice that this is not *exhaustive determinism* as K-2’s “guiding thoughts” were not causally determined (K-2 was the source of “his” thinking in a libertarian sense).

In this case I concede that K-2 should (or at least *could*) be held responsible and is worthy of praise. This is the case because the droid has libertarian freedom to think and freely chose to act in the only manner that “he” physically could act (although K-2 did not know he could not physically act otherwise). K-2’s actions seem to be “up to him” (in the source sense) and “he” wanted to act in the exact same manner as “he” did act—although K-2 had no opportunity to act or move otherwise—Yoda makes sure of that much. Nevertheless, K-2 seems to have the ability to think/“guide” otherwise. Consider the next case:

5- Suppose once again that K-2 somehow transcends his new programmed nature that formerly causally determined the droid to always make “choices” or to act in accordance with the goals of the Rebellion. However, this time K-2 uses “his” libertarian freedom and chooses to go back to acting in accordance with the droid’s original programmed “Empire nature.” Libertarian K-2 now freely chooses to act in accordance with the Empire’s evil goals. All is not lost, however, because Yoda is there using the force to manipulate K-2’s actions (even the words that come out of the droid’s mouth) and everything the droid physically does is in accordance with the goals of the Rebellion as the droid saves the day (K-2 cannot do otherwise, but “he” was freely thinking, freely wanting, and freely trying to do otherwise).

In this case, who is responsible for all the good K-2 is doing for the Rebellion? Surely K-2 is not to be praised—Yoda is responsible. It seems to me that the only time the droid could be held accountable (in a desert sense) for “his” actions was when “he” somehow transcended “his” programmed nature and freely chose to act in accordance with the way Yoda would *force* “him” to act anyway (if Yoda were not there, nothing would have changed). He possessed free thinking (in a libertarian sense) in this instance and had so-called, “guidance control.” All other examples demonstrate that either whoever programmed K-2 last was responsible for his actions or Yoda was responsible for the droid’s actions.⁴¹

In the last case offered above (5), the droid still possessed libertarian free will to *think* otherwise but not to *act* otherwise. It is vital to distinguish between the two. However, in this scenario the exhaustive determinism Bignon desires to be true is false because one is free in the libertarian sense to think otherwise.⁴²

⁴¹ In the first two cases, K-2SO is “reasons responsive,” but *HOW* the droid reasons is causally determined by “his” last programmer. Thus, although one might refer to the droid’s reasoning mechanism as “his own,” K-2’s reasoning (either in light of the goals of the Empire or the Rebellion) is causally determined by another responsible agent.

⁴² Derk Pereboom, regarding “cases” such as these, says: “It’s not as if there’s an argument that the compatibilist or the neutral party *SHOULD* have an intuition of non-responsibility . . . it’s purely a fishing expedition. You as an incompatibilist *HOPE* that the compatibilist will have this intuition.” (*The Free Will Show, Episode 8: The Manipulation Argument with Derk Pereboom*, 2020). However, if human intuition is also always causally determined by God, then the only reason Bignon judges or “intuits” that humans do not possess the libertarian freedom to think and judge is only because God causally determines him to possess this intuition, while God causally determines others to think, judge, and “intuit” otherwise.

It seems to me that the only way for Bignon to find some “elbow room” for responsibility (at least in the sense of deserving praise or blame) is to deny *exhaustive* divine determinism and incorporate a little limited libertarian freedom (at least some of the time) when it comes to thinking, evaluating, assessing, and judging (among other things). But then we are no longer discussing Bignon’s greatest desire of *exhaustive* divine determinism (EDD) as the thoughts and judgements of agents would still be free in a libertarian sense, even if their actions were not. This would not be determinism of all things, but rather, “semi-determinism.”

One prominent Christian philosopher had this to say regarding my Star Wars cases:

I agree with you essentially . . . certainly we are not the “source” of those choices in a way that gives us control to choose differently. And our “responsibility” in this case seems even more diminished if an intelligent agent (God) is purposely determining things so we “guide” things exactly as we do. Or so it seems to me.

Here’s the bottom line: I argue that on any view of *exhaustive* causal divine determinism (which includes all thoughts, judgements, actions, beliefs, and behaviors), humans are no different than droids (even imaginary robots with causally determined intentional states of consciousness) and are not genuinely responsible for our thoughts, judgements, actions, beliefs, or behaviors.⁴³ Thus, it follows that if exhaustive divine determinism is true, then it is not genuinely “up to us” what we think, how we guide, or what we ultimately believe. It is not “up to” people to choose between being a Calvinist, Open Theist, or even an atheist. If God causally determines all things, then all things—including all thoughts, evaluations, judgements, and beliefs—are also exhaustively causally determined by God. If humans cannot even guide our own thoughts in a source sense of libertarian freedom, then it seems absurd to think that a good, loving, just, and omnibenevolent God would hold humans responsible (morally blameworthy) for thinking and guiding exactly the way God causally determined the human to think and guide (especially when humans possess no opportunity to exercise an ability to think or guide otherwise). If the way I guide anything is really up to me, and not causally determined by God (or anything else), then I possess libertarian freedom of thought. If any of my evaluations or judgements are not causally determined by God (or anything else), then I possess libertarian freedom.

It seems to me that the problem many compatibilists make is found in that they are often so focused on the ability to physically *do* otherwise, that they forget about the ability to *think* otherwise. Are all of our thoughts causally determined by something or someone else? If so, “guidance control” is not ultimately under our control—God determines how we want to guide our actions. However, if our thoughts are actually free in a libertarian sense (and we are really free thinkers), then *exhaustive* divine determinism is false.

Bignon writes:

Likewise, competing accounts are offered for what counts as “up to us.” There are compatibilist and incompatibilist ways to unpack “up-to-us-ness” (p. 28).

⁴³ Leighton Flowers argues that this is a fair comparison given the Calvinist’s appeal to Romans 9 comparing humans to clay: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kum_VxM6ft8

Consider the *Ted & EDD Arguments* I've been working on. This is related to the problem of thoughts or beliefs being "up-to-us" if they are causally determined by something other than us.

- 1- If Ted cannot determine what he ought to believe, then Ted is not responsible for his beliefs.
- 2- If God causally determines what Ted believes, then Ted cannot determine what he ought to believe.
- 3- If EDD is true, God causally determines Ted to believe X.
- 4- Therefore, if EDD is true, Ted is not responsible for belief X.

Here's another syllogism currently under construction (I really like this one):

- 1- A rational agent possesses opportunities to exercise an ability to infer better and true beliefs (over false ones) in an appropriate environment.
- 2- If Ted does not possess the opportunity to exercise his ability to infer better and true beliefs (over false ones) in an appropriate environment, then Ted is not a rational agent.
- 3- If Ted is causally determined to affirm a false belief, then Ted does not possess the opportunity to exercise an ability to infer better and true beliefs in an appropriate environment.
- 4- If EDD is true, Ted is causally determined to affirm false beliefs and does not possess the opportunity to exercise an ability to infer better and true beliefs.
- 5- Therefore, if EDD is true, Ted is not a rational agent.

I make it clear: "if an agent is not the source and originator of his own thoughts (and something external to the person is causally determining the person's thoughts), ... then he is merely left assuming his or her determined thoughts are good—let alone true" (p.179). Bignon, however, claims that I am begging the question "as it's unsupported by premises the Calvinist would accept" (p. 27).

It is vital to remind readers that not all Calvinists agree with Bignon. As noted above, I offer several examples of Reformed theologians who affirm or are open to the libertarian freedom to think, judge, and evaluate regarding the "matters below" even if they affirm TULIP. Be that as it may, surely Bignon accepts the following: "If, in the actual world, God causally determines Bignon to affirm a false belief, then, in the actual world, it is impossible for Bignon to infer a better and true belief." And this one: "If God causally determines an alternative range of evaluative judgement options (EJOs) to be metaphysically closed off and locked away from Bignon's mental access, then Bignon stands in no position to know if the EJOs that are locked away are any good or true." He can only assume. This is the epitome of begging the question.

Bignon concedes:

But yes, determinism does mean that all things, including people's false beliefs, are determined ultimately by God . . . the Calvinist thinks that God has morally sufficient reasons for determining that, just as he has morally sufficient reasons for all the evil that happens in this world (p. 29).

Then the *reason* the “Calvinist thinks” such things is ultimately because this thought is causally determined by the same deity of deception who causally determines all humans to affirm false beliefs. This provides an undercutting defeater to what “the Calvinist thinks.” If we are not free creatures, then God could simply causally determine all agents to always think and believe correctly all the time via a miraculous “zap,” or via intelligently designed and fine-tuned cognitive faculties to always think correctly. What exactly are we supposed to learn by these supposed “morally sufficient reasons?” And what are they? The EDD folks punt to mystery here. As I explain in the final chapter of my book, Molinists can answer the question.

Be that as it may, Bignon misses the main point of my argument and moves the goalposts. It’s not about if God has “morally sufficient reasons.” It’s about the fact that on EDD, God causally determines all humans, all Christians, and even all “elect” Calvinists to happily affirm false theological beliefs. I do believe that this relegates God from the status of a “maximally great being” down to nothing but a “god of mischief,” but even if I’m wrong (because the deity of deception has “morally sufficient reasons” to deceive humanity), humanity still lacks the opportunity to exercise an ability to rationally infer the best beliefs from among a range of alternative EJOs and thus, cannot rationally affirm that the causally determined judgment/belief is any good at all—let alone true. Why? Because on the EDD view, God causally determines (in some form or fashion) all people to affirm false beliefs. Thus (as noted above), on Bignon’s view, his theological beliefs (including those discussed here) are not reliable.⁴⁴

Bignon eventually interacts with the *Strattonian Mad Scientist*. He attempts to summarize it by describing it as a “manipulation case to argue that we couldn’t know anything if we were under that scientist’s control and that the same problem applies if God determines us” (p. 29).

That’s not quite right. I point out that rational *affirmation* of one’s beliefs would be impossible. Now, if rational affirmation is justification, and if justification is required for the kind of knowledge worth wanting (which I think it is), then this kind of specific knowledge is not possible given this thought experiment (although there might be other kinds of knowledge available). Consider the thought experiment found on page 173 of my book:

Suppose a mad scientist exhaustively controls (causally determines) all of Smith’s thoughts and beliefs all the time [exactly what Smith thinks of and about and exactly how Smith thinks of and about it]. Now consider this question: “How could Smith (not the mad scientist) rationally affirm the current beliefs in his head as good, bad, better, the best, true or probably true without begging the question?” This is an impossible task because any answer Smith might give would not be “up to him” but up to the mad scientist.

Bignon’s response is lacking: “The problem is that Stratton doesn’t tell us how the scientist does that. Does the scientist’s contraption make our beliefs non-reason-responsive?” (p. 29) The scientist’s contraption causally determines how one responds to, thinks about, evaluates, and

⁴⁴ Eric Hernandez pointed out that Bignon seems to be implicitly conceding my point by admitting that on EDD Calvinism, people are not rational agents. Instead of rebutting it, he merely offers a theodicy as to why he agrees with the conclusion of my argument.

judges said “reasons.” Whether it’s the mad scientist or God, either way, if we are discussing *exhaustive* determinism, then the manner in which Bignon judges a “reason” is causally determined by someone other than Bignon (even if it is through secondary means). The *how* is irrelevant. EDD is EDD and the problems persist no matter how one is exhaustively determined.

Bignon has already admitted that EDD entails that every time agents (including the elect) affirm false beliefs, it is because God causally determines these “errors” (errors from our perspective, not God’s) in judgment to occur. Thus, God always causally determines exactly how one responds to reasons—and one’s response to a “reason” (affirming true or false beliefs) always happens perfectly—exactly the way God causally determines it to occur.

Bignon says:

If he just shoves beliefs in our brains with electrodes regardless of the evidence coming our way, then of course that makes our cognitive faculties unreliable and removes warrant for our beliefs, but then that makes it relevantly disanalogous to the normal compatibilist case where God determines our beliefs in ways that leave our cognitive faculties reasons-responsive (p. 29).

The “normal cases,” on Bignon’s EDD view, is that all humans—including all Christians and “elect” Calvinists—are causally determined to affirm and advance false theological beliefs. This is because on Bignon’s EDD view, human belief (even Christian belief) is not always aimed at true belief formation—it is always aimed at the center of “the deity of deception’s” will. And, apparently, given the peripheral disagreements between academic peers who both affirm Calvinism (not to mention the multitude of Christian scholars who reject Calvinism), God causally determines even the “elect” to affirm false beliefs. That’s the normal cases on EDD.

So, with that in mind, Bignon *should* see (unless he is causally determined by the deity of deception not to see) that he has another undercutting defeater to his own belief which is impossible to rationally affirm. As I’ve already explained above (see the Dominion Voting Machine illustration), the *how* of exhaustive causal determinism is irrelevant. EDD is EDD. I affirm proper function, I just point out and argue that at least occasionally, proper function entails the libertarian freedom to think, judge, and evaluate. Proper function is great, but when it is married to EDD, it becomes severely problematic for the reasons offered above.

Aiming at truth

This brings us to a discussion about being aimed at truth. Bignon writes:

Alvin Plantinga famously argued that our true beliefs amount to knowledge only if they are produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly, in an environment that is friendly to them, and according to a design plan aimed at truth (p. 30).

Amen to that! I love this argument known as the *Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism* (EAAN). The problem on EDD, is that if God causally determines Bignon to affirm false theological beliefs in a certain environment, how can Bignon refer to this environment—

providing zero opportunity to infer truth—as an environment that is “friendly” to him? What about the damned—is it “friendly” to them? On EDD, one’s cognitive faculties always function perfectly—exactly the way that God causally determines them to function—even if they causally determine a person to think, judge, and evaluate incorrectly. If these causally determined false beliefs lead to an eternity separated from God and all that is good, how can this be referred to as a “friendly environment” (at least to the majority of humanity)?

Bignon summarizes Plantinga’s argument:

Plantinga argued that if naturalism and evolution are true, then our cognitive faculties are designed by chance and natural selection to aim at “survival,” not particularly at “truth, which would give us a reason to think they’re not reliable to produce a preponderance of true beliefs. That, in turn, would be a defeater for all the beliefs they produce, including our beliefs in naturalism and evolution, therefore making the pair of beliefs self-refuting. He called this the “Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism” (p. 30).

Bignon has a good grasp of the EAAN. Be that as it may, if he affirms the EAAN, he *should* also affirm the *FreeThinking Argument Against Naturalism* (FAAN). This is because if all human thoughts and beliefs are causally determined via the forces and past events of nature (non-thinking/non-rational things), then one has a “defeater for all the beliefs they produce, including our beliefs in naturalism.” The FAAN is true (the forces and past events of nature are not aimed at truth formation) for the same reason the EAAN is true (evolution being aimed at survival and not aimed at truth). So, if Bignon affirms the EAAN (he seems to endorse it in his review), then he ought to endorse the FAAN, even if he rejects the *Revised FreeThinking Argument* showing the same problems arise on EDD.⁴⁵

Speaking of the *Revised FreeThinking Argument*, Bignon attempts to escape its conclusion by admitting that “God determines us to hold some true beliefs, and some false beliefs, all according to God’s plan . . . This confuses general design and meticulous providential purposes” (p. 30). But the problem still remains no matter how one is causally determined. The problem is EDD. Bignon responds with theological gymnastics:

The sense of “aim” relevant to Plantinga’s argument is one that refers to the general design of our cognitive faculties. And the general design of our cognitive faculties—how God has wired the minds of humans in general—can perfectly be said to be “aimed at truth” on theological determinism, even as we also say that God, in his meticulous providence, has specific purposes behind his decree of just when our cognitive faculties will in fact function properly or not. Therefore, determinism isn’t a reason to think our faculties aren’t aimed at truth in the relevant sense (p. 30).

However, if EDD is true, then one’s cognitive faculties never truly fail (at least not from God’s perspective). They always function exactly as God has causally determined them to function—even when it leads to Islam, atheism, Hitler, Mormonism, Open Theism, or the notorious *Passion*

⁴⁵ The *Revised FreeThinking Argument* is found on page 171-172 of *Mere Molinism*. I am embarrassed to admit that I worded premise (C5) incorrectly. It should read, “It is possible to gain knowledge via the process of rationality.” With that said, charitable readers will see the essence of the premise and the conclusions that follow.

*Translation of the Bible.*⁴⁶ I reference the Dominion Voting Machines once again to make my point (see above). Bignon's above quote seems to show that he might see the problem since he abandons specific wording previously used when referring to God's will. Let's rephrase Bignon's above words in the following manner:

"The sense of 'aim' relevant to Plantinga's argument is one that refers to the general design of our cognitive faculties. And the general design of our cognitive faculties—how God has 'wired' (causally determined) the minds of humans in general—can perfectly be said to be "aimed at truth" [most of the time, but not regarding theological issues] on theological determinism, even as we also say that God, in his meticulous providence, has specific purposes and causally determined exactly when our cognitive faculties will in fact properly function to attain true beliefs and also causally determine them to function properly in every single instance when a false belief is affirmed."

Does not this view of God, man, and reality seem absurd? Does not EDD seem absurd?

In a surprising move, Bignon seems to tacitly endorse the *FreeThinking Argument Against Naturalism* and says that the "conclusion is only given to you by naturalistic determinism . . . but it doesn't undermine Calvinism and its theological determinism at all" (p. 31).

Although I have provided reason to think Bignon is incorrect regarding the latter, given the former, I happily accept Bignon's endorsement of the FAAN (remember, the reasoning behind the FAAN is similar to that of Plantinga's EAAN). Thank you, Guillaume Bignon!

If there is any confusion on this matter, Bignon doubles down on his endorsement of the FAAN:

Stratton adds that on determinism our beliefs are determined by external factors that are not rational: "their [the determinists'] very conclusion about determinism would simply be determined by external factors (perhaps chemistry and physics) that are not aimed at truth and have nothing to do with rationality, the process of acquiring reason-based knowledge, or critical thinking and logic."

Yes, chemistry and physics aren't rational (p. 31).

Excellent! Once again Bignon (tacitly?) affirms the FreeThinking Argument Against Naturalism. However, regarding the *Revised FreeThinking Argument*, which aims to show rationality problems not only regarding naturalistic determinism, but also EDD, Bignon attempts an escape with the following response: "But on theological determinism, they're ultimately determined by God who is most definitely rational" (p. 31).

To be clear, God is the perfect standard of knowledge and does not rationally infer the best belief, but I know what Bignon means. Be that as it may, the mad scientist and Loki (the "god of mischief") are also rational. Being rational alone is irrelevant if the rational agent regularly causally determines humans to affirm false theological beliefs (or other kinds of beliefs). Bignon continues his escape attempt and says that "As long as God exists—which a lot of Calvinists

⁴⁶ See Mike Winger's discussion on *The Passion Translation*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZ2HrBT3ZgA>

believe!—determinism doesn't entail that our cognitive faculties aren't aimed at truth in the sense relevant to warrant à la Plantinga" (p. 31).

I am glad that "a lot of Calvinists believe" that God exists, but as noted above, if a Calvinist explicitly or implicitly rejects perfect being theology (the view that God, by definition, is a Maximally Great Being), then Bignon's claim is called into question. If the very powerful supernatural creator of the universe is really a "god of mischief" or a deity of deception—whose will and greatest desire is to fool and deceive all humans on some level—then all bets are off! If a Maximally Great Being does not exist, then "a lot of Calvinists" actually do not believe in God, but a mere supernatural and powerful creator of the universe.⁴⁷ It seems to me that this is exactly how Bignon conceives of the being he worships.⁴⁸

Be that as it may, suppose the creator of the universe is a deity of deception or a "god of mischief" (let's call him Loki), but has "good reasons" for being deceptive and mischievous. He even fine-tuned the initial conditions of the Big Bang to causally determine a life-permitting universe billions of years ago. Next, suppose that Loki created humanity and intelligently designed human cognitive faculties to always function exactly the way Loki "wires" them to function. That is to say, every time a human attains a true belief, that was causally determined by the cognitive faculties which were causally determined to function exactly as Loki "programmed" them to function. (Thank you, Loki!)

But there's a catch! Loki has exhaustively causally determined all things regarding human cognitive faculties. This means that every time a human affirms a false belief, that was causally determined by the cognitive faculties which were causally determined to function exactly as Loki "programmed" and causally determined them to function. What's more, Loki's will (based upon his "morally sufficient reasons"—whatever those might be) is for all humans to possess and affirm false theological beliefs (not to mention false metaphysical beliefs, philosophical beliefs, scientific beliefs, etc.)! In fact, even the humans that Loki causally determines to "believe in him" are causally determined by way of the cognitive faculties (which he fine-tuned and intelligently designed) to affirm false theological beliefs (which is apparent because the "elect" group of Loki followers disagree on many other theological issues).

What have I described? It seems to me that this illustration depicts Bignon's view of God. This "EDD God" is nothing more than a "god of mischief." The problem is not properly functioning cognitive faculties—I affirm proper function—the problem arises when proper function is married to EDD, along with the fact that all humans affirm false beliefs and false theological beliefs. I possess an extremely high view of God's Word, but I affirm and advance an even higher view of God—a maximally great and perfect view of God. Anything otherwise is something akin to Loki and an idol.

Finally, speaking of "à la Plantinga," Alvin Plantinga is a Molinist who affirms and advances the belief that humans possess libertarian freedom. Why assume (or, à la Plantinga, "why think a

⁴⁷ See, *The Petals Drop: Calvinism Implies Atheism*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/the-petals-drop-calvinism-implies-atheism/>

⁴⁸ To be clear, Calvinists are typically quick to exclaim that God is "maximally great." Be that as it may, they often have a much different view, from non-Calvinists, of what maximal greatness entails.

thing like that?") one of the greatest libertarian freedom fighters in the history of the world would reject the idea that at least occasionally, proper function entails libertarian freedom which provides humans with the opportunity to exercise the ability to evaluate, judge, and choose the *best* explanation among a range of alternative hypotheses each compatible with human nature? After all, what good is libertarian freedom if it does not apply to an agent's thought life?⁴⁹

With proper function in mind, consider the (updated) syllogism from my book (p. 175):

1. For any human x, x's cognitive faculties are designed to function properly in an appropriate environment.
2. For any human x, if x's cognitive faculties are designed to function properly in an appropriate environment, then, either (i) human x is infallible, or (ii) through a mature, conscious process of properly functioning faculties, x can (*has the opportunity to exercise an ability to*) reject irrational thinking in favor of rational thinking.
3. Therefore, for any human x, x is either (i) infallible or (ii) x can, through a mature, conscious process of properly functioning faculties, reject irrational thinking in favor of rational thinking (entails libertarian freedom).⁵⁰

This might raise questions regarding the epistemological debate pertaining to internalism and externalism. But why think that a strict externalist must deny the ability to think of and about competing ideas, propositions, or hypotheses? Obviously, an internalist has no problem with affirming this ability, but it seems crazy that anyone would reject that ability.

Moreover, if an externalist does affirm this ability, would they necessarily deny their ability to *freely* judge and evaluate a proposition as good, bad, better, worse, true, false, probably true, or probably false? (Note the range of alternative options that must be compatible with a person's nature.) Or must they affirm that someone or something else apart from their control (God) exhaustively causally determines all of their evaluative thoughts? That is, since the externalist is not necessarily committed to exhaustive causal determinism (both Alvin Plantinga and Tyler McNabb are leading externalists who also affirm and advance both Molinism and libertarian freedom), why would he not also affirm his ability to freely judge and evaluate certain hypotheses, propositions, ideas, concepts, premises, or arguments?

Bottom line: Bignon's commitment to the "exhaustive" is problematic. Philosophers (so I'm told) are trained to look for words like "all" when analyzing arguments as it makes them much easier to refute. This is exactly why I am persistent and include the word "exhaustive" despite Bignon's protests that it is implied by "determinism."

Indirect doxastic voluntarism

⁴⁹ To the libertarian following along who rejects the FreeThinking Argument, if humans do not possess libertarian freedom when it comes to our thought life, then where does it apply? Moreover, what good is it? If it doesn't provide any benefit to humanity, then why not join Bignon's camp of EDD compatibilists? (That's what I would do if I were convinced that something or someone outside of my control causally determines *all* of my thoughts, judgements, and beliefs.) Consider the "*Oughts and Thoughts Argument*" I offered on p. 270 of "Mere Molinism."

⁵⁰ Recall the word "can" is used in a broad sense to mean "an opportunity to exercise one's ability to do otherwise."

On page 170 of my book I discuss what it means to choose and be responsible for one's beliefs. This is a philosophical view referred to as Indirect Doxastic Voluntarism. I even quote two of the greatest Christian philosophers in the field today to show the relevance of libertarian freedom when it comes to the responsibility of beliefs:

Libertarians claim that we hold people responsible for what they believe (and the New Testament would seem to command people to believe certain things and hold them accountable for their choice to believe or not to believe), and this requires some form of doxastic voluntarism to be true.⁵¹

Bignon replies by admitting that he does “agree that Christians will want to affirm something like indirect doxastic voluntarism, because it seems to me at least some of our beliefs are such that we can be held morally responsible for holding them.” To that we both agree. Be that as it may, he follows that by saying that it is:

not clear at all why determinists can't affirm exactly that, and deny that it requires libertarian free will. Doxastic voluntarism has to do with “controlling” one's beliefs in such a way that one can be morally responsible for them. It's wide open for Calvinists to use a compatibilist-friendly account of control such as Fischer and Ravizza's “guidance control” that I mentioned above (p. 32).

Again, Bignon's blind spot is the “exhaustive” divine determinism. If all means all, then Bignon is not responsible (in a desert sense) for “his guidance.” That is to say (and as noted above), if exhaustive divine determinism is true, then humans are not the “source” of these choices in a way that gives us *control* or *opportunity* to make a difference. And our “responsibility” in this case seems even more diminished if an intelligent agent (God) is purposely causally determining all things all the time so that we are causally determined to “guide” things exactly as we do. I fail to see how the “moral responsibility” that Bignon wants to have access to is actually accessible on his view of EDD.

However, if Bignon would posit the idea that there is no physical ability to act otherwise, but we do freely guide—in a libertarian sense—in the exact manner that it was physically possible to act (recall the Star Wars cases above), then I am open to that weird, but seemingly logically possible view. Be that as it may, on that view EDD is false because humans are the source of our “guidance control” (thus, libertarian freedom is part of reality).

Bignon notes that readers may not be convinced by his attempts to free himself from the problems of EDD. He responds,

c'est la vie. But one doesn't need to accept compatibilism to appreciate that Stratton's free-thinking argument falls far short of refuting determinism, much less justifies his awarding it the trophy of best argument ever offered for libertarianism: “As this author sees it, of all the arguments that have been developed in support of libertarian freedom,

⁵¹ J.P. Moreland & William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003) 87.

there is one [the free-thinking argument] that seems to supersede all others” (p.167). If it’s indeed the best the other side has to offer, Calvinists are pretty safe (p. 32).

The reason that it seems to me (or “as this author sees it”) to be the strongest argument for libertarian freedom is because it is focused on the opportunity to exercise an ability to reason and rationally argue—the foundation of the arena in which Bignon and I are dueling. If Bignon asserts that he has no opportunity to exercise an ability to infer better and true beliefs—an opportunity not available on exhaustive divine determinism—then Bignon seems to lack a vital attribute of a rational agent. This provides an undercutting defeater to his worldview if he admits it or not. Calvinism is “safe” *only* if Bignon follows the lead of those like Kelly Fitzsimmons Burton⁵² or Greg Koukl (an ardent 5-point Calvinist who affirms the libertarian freedom to think, judge, assess, and evaluate). I quoted Koukl in my book (p. 176); I quote him again now:

The problem with [determinism] is that without freedom, rationality would have no room to operate. Arguments would not matter, since no one would be able to base beliefs on adequate reasons. One could never judge between a good idea and a bad one. One would only hold beliefs because he had been predetermined to do so.... Every one of our thoughts, dispositions, and opinions would have been decided for us by factors completely out of our control. Therefore, in practice, arguments for determinism are self-defeating.⁵³

Indeed, this is the vertigo in which William Lane Craig refers: “*a sort of vertigo sets in, for everything that you think, even this very thought itself, is outside your control.*” With this in mind, if all thoughts are outside of your control, so much for “guidance control.”

- 1- If all thoughts are causally determined by something or someone outside of human control, then humans do not possess guidance control.
- 2- Humans do possess guidance control.
- 3- Therefore, not all thoughts are causally determined by something or someone outside of human control.

Not only do the family of FreeThinking Arguments remain unscathed, they seem to be standing stronger than before. Big EDD, on the other hand, is a giant that seems to have been slain. Fortunately for the Calvinist, and as I make clear in my book, Calvinism does not have to be equated (and should not be conflated) with EDD. Bignon can stomp his foot and declare otherwise, but they are not the same thing.

Bottom line: Bignon’s lengthy attempts at taking down what I take to be the primary philosophical case for libertarian freedom has failed (in fact, he tacitly affirmed it). Perhaps his most important critique is that God, as a reliable revealer of truth, can determine that we make sound judgements. But of course, if EDD were true, then we would all arrive at the same conclusions in light of the same evidence: God would not determine some to reason that P, and determine others to reason not-P. Thus, Bignon’s critique is not strong.

⁵² Burton (an epistemologist) informed me that she affirms the Westminster Confession and rejects EDD.

⁵³ Greg Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 128-129.

If only one of my arguments for libertarian freedom pass, then my task has been completed. Not only is it reasonable to conclude that humans possess libertarian freedom, but a certain theological view has been debunked: exhaustive divine (causal) determinism is false. Let's see how Bignon fares against the arguments I deem to be of lesser importance.

Theological Issues

At this point, Bignon takes aim at the thirteenth chapter which seeks to provide theological arguments for human libertarian freedom. One of the arguments offered in this chapter is based upon a "plain and common-sense interpretation" of the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Cor 10:13. Bignon notes that I offered an argument to support my case but chose not to share the syllogism in his review. It is important for those following along to examine it closely:

- 1- If Christians possess the ability to choose among a range of alternative options each compatible with their regenerated nature at a given moment, then Christians possess libertarian freedom.
- 2- At the moment of temptation, Christians possess the ability to choose between giving into temptation or to take the way of escape God promises to provide (1 Cor. 10:13).
- 3- Therefore, Christians possess libertarian freedom.

1 Cor. 10:13 seems to heavily imply that when faced with temptation, Christians have an opportunity to exercise an ability to escape sin or not. That is to say, "Christians possess the ability to choose between giving in to temptation or to take the way of escape God promises to provide." Be that as it may, if EDD is true, then an opportunity to exercise this ability does not exist. If one possesses no opportunity to escape temptation, then surely one should not be blamed for being causally determined to sin (there was simply no opportunity to do anything to the contrary).

Bignon, as he did before, responds by bringing up the different manners of understanding the word "ability," and says, "to just claim that the ability needs to be categorical rather than conditional . . . begs the question of incompatibilism . . ." (p. 33).

Lest the waters get muddied again, consider the syllogism slightly rephrased:

- 1- If Christians possess the opportunity to exercise their ability to choose among a range of alternative options each compatible with their regenerated nature at a given moment, then Christians possess libertarian freedom.
- 2- At the moment of temptation, Christians possess the opportunity to exercise their ability to choose between giving into temptation or to take the way of escape God promises to provide (1 Cor. 10:13).
- 3- Therefore, Christians possess libertarian freedom.

Ultimately, the conditional Bignon appeals to is simply that God could freely choose to causally determine otherwise (big deal). Certainly, this is not a "plain and common sense reading of the Apostle Paul's words." At the least, Paul's words here seem to assume a Christian's opportunity

to exercise his or her ability to choose among a range of alternative options each compatible with his or her regenerated nature in the actual world at the moment of temptation (to fall in to temptation or to take the way of escape God promises to provide). This seems far clearer than Bignon's contentious leap that Romans 9 implies *exhaustive* divine determinism!⁵⁴

Examine Paul's own words from the "Calvinist Bible" (the ESV):

¹²Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. ¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ¹⁴Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

Does Bignon expect us to believe that what Paul was really trying to communicate was the following?

Therefore let anyone who thinks (not that you could think otherwise unless God causally determined you to do so) that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability (that is, God's ability to causally determine you differently), but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape (in another possible world, but not this one), that you may be able to endure it (if God causally determines you to endure it). Therefore, my beloved, (God will causally determine some of you to) flee from idolatry (and God will causally determine others of you to sin, but conditionally, God could have done otherwise, so take heart). I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves (exactly how God causally determines you to judge) what I say.

This is not only absurd, but it slaps the face of Paul while devaluing the Word of God (or so it seems to me). I'm simply amazed at the lengths one will go to in order to save one's metaphysical commitment to EDD. I am not asking Bignon to give up Reformed Theology, Calvinism, or even TULIP. I am simply pointing out that EDD is false. God does not exhaustively causally determine all things all the time (however, I do contend that God exhaustively *predestines* all things, and, as I explain in my book, "mere Molinism" demonstrates how this is possible).

Greatest subjective desires

Compatibilists often assert a non-falsifiable claim: One can *only* choose one's "greatest desire" at a given moment. Bignon could not have said it better: "human choice is always the one and only that corresponds to the person's "greatest desire" at the moment of choice" (p. 34). No matter how or what one chooses, they will simply say, "well, that was simply his or her greatest desire at the moment." However, it seems to me that there is good reason to doubt this assumption. That reason *is* reason.

⁵⁴ See, *But Who Are You O Man?*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/but-who-are-you-o-man-romans-9/>

Making choices based upon reason is far different than making choices based upon subjective “greatest desires.”⁵⁵ After all, if the only causal “reason” Bignon rejects Molinism is because he has a subjective greatest desire for EDD, then this is no rational reason at all to reject Molinism. As soon as he starts arguing against Molinism, now he is offering something quite different than mere desire. As I explained in my book: “. . . *even if a person happens to hold a true belief, it is not a rationally inferred belief; it is simply his greatest desire.*” To which Bignon responds: “[T]he compatibilist affirms it’s ‘both and’ in each case...” (p. 34).

I know what the compatibilist *asserts*, but I am making an argument similar to the EAAN, once again, an argument which Bignon affirms. Just as “beliefs aimed at survival” provides an undercutting defeater to the view of the naturalist/evolutionist, “beliefs aimed solely at greatest desires” provides an undercutting defeater to Bignon’s greatest desire for EDD to be true. After all, subjective desires are often opposed to objective and ontological reality.

As the FreeThinking Argument continues to demonstrate, if one’s thoughts, beliefs, judgements, assessments, and intuitions are always causally determined by God, physics and chemistry, nefarious neurosurgeons, Loki, survival, or greatest subjective desires, then one has no opportunity to exercise an ability to judge this view differently, even if the view is false. If Bignon’s greatest desire is to happily affirm a false belief (which is causally determined by God according to his view), then it is impossible for Bignon to reject his greatest desire even if he should (that is, even if his greatest desire does not correspond to reality).

If an agent has no opportunity to exercise his or her ability to think past a subjective greatest desire at a given moment, one does not seem to be a rational agent.

Bignon adds:

... and we’re not given independent arguments to exclude the view that our “greatest desires” could also be based on logic and reason, be aiming at truth, and be rationally inferred (p. 34).

The naturalist/evolutionist responds in a similar manner. They will say, “why can’t survival also be based on logic and reason?” The answer is because they are two different kinds of things.⁵⁶ Take Guillaume Bignon and Greg Koukl, for example: Both Bignon and Koukl are well-informed 5-Point Calvinists who disagree on the issue of libertarian freedom. Koukl believes that humans possess a limited libertarian freedom, and Bignon asserts otherwise. Are we really supposed to believe that the “reason” Bignon rejects libertarian freedom is because he has a greatest subjective desire for EDD to be true, and that the reason Koukl disagrees with Bignon is because Koukl’s greatest desire is for EDD to be false? Absurdity on top of absurdities! That “reason” is not a good reason.

⁵⁵ Recall the Droid & Yoda cases. If K-2 has a programmed and causally determined “Empire nature” (a greatest desire for the Empire), then the droid will “reason” accordingly (even if the Empire’s goals are objectively absurd).

⁵⁶ I’m reminded of Blaise Pascal: “*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*” In English: “The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.”

Bottom line: if our beliefs (and any evaluation of one's own beliefs) are always and only determined by our greatest subjective desires at a given moment, then we stand in no position to know if our greatest subjective desire is objectively true or not.

Bignon declares:

Stratton fails to appreciate that on determinism, when our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, our so-called "greatest desire" is aligned with the evidence that educates and motivates our choice (p. 34).

How can "Stratton fail" if Stratton had no opportunity to exercise an ability to think otherwise? Be that as it may, surely Bignon makes no claims of infallibility. And since he does affirm EDD, he is left with the uncomfortable view that every time he happily affirms a false belief, his cognitive faculties were "functioning properly" (at least from God's perspective). Not only is this problematic for human rationality, it relegates the creator of the universe from the status of a Maximally Great Being to something akin to Loki "the god of mischief" and a deity of deception. Moreover, on Bignon's view, if his greatest desire is for EDD to be true, then he will always judge and evaluate said "evidence that educates and motivates our choice" via his greatest subjective desire. Talk about bias! The same nature with a greatest desire is the same nature evaluating evidence through the lens of this greatest desire (which causally determines how one thinks about each and every proposition).

Bignon exclaims: "With a minimum of intellectual integrity, our "greatest desire" is going to be following the evidence" (p. 34). But what does Bignon mean by "intellectual integrity"? If he means, "with a little bit of an ability to free oneself from one's greatest desire to make choices based upon inference to the best explanation," then I agree. But that means that we do not always choose based upon our greatest desires, but rather, based upon the ability to freely think (reason itself)! Subjective desires often get in the way of objective truth.⁵⁷

Bignon fails to appreciate the specific kind of rationality I am discussing and attacks a straw man by appealing to the same kind of "rationality" that my dog has:

It's going to be molded by the evidence. I walk into the kitchen, I see and smell a fresh loaf of bread, and I rationally infer "someone has baked bread." To do the opposite instead, and "freely think" that no one has baked any bread despite the loaf and the smell, is positively inconsistent with my intellect (I don't mean to brag) (p. 34).

Surely, when my dog smells bacon, Rondo is "rational" (in a sense) to infer that something smells really good and he wants to eat it. This, however, misses the point.⁵⁸ My argument for limited libertarian freedom cannot be undercut by offering some examples of reaching a few unimpressive warranted beliefs. I am not the one arguing for an "all." That's the burden of the

⁵⁷ My former "greatest desire" was for EDD to be true. Either God determined me to believe otherwise, or I was able to freely think. See *Molinism Saves Marriages*: <https://freethinkingministries.com/molism-saves-marriages/>

⁵⁸ See my earlier response to Bignon: *A Rational Refutation of Divine Determinism*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFKg0veH7fo> and a shorter clip called, *Dismantling the Thermometer Analogy*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qCsTcZZb8E&t=5s>

exhaustive divine determinist. I am concerned about meta-level analysis, the inference to the best explanation, and the ability to rationally affirm knowledge claims (similar to what Detective J. Warner Wallace might do when solving a cold-case murder).⁵⁹ That’s a completely different kind of “rationality” that dogs do not seem to possess.

Moreover, a computer programmer can causally determine a robot to possess faculties that when it rolls into a kitchen and detects a fresh loaf of bread, then it will conclude “someone has baked bread.” That’s great! A computer programmer has the ability to program a robot to do so. But let’s also suppose that this same programmer decides to program the robot’s cognitive faculties in such a way, that even though it concludes that “someone has baked bread” whenever it detects a fresh loaf of bread in a kitchen (which seems rather unimpressive), it always concludes the Kalam Cosmological Argument to be an unsound argument (call it the robot’s programmed and causally determined “greatest desire” for the Kalam to be false).

No matter what arguments are presented to the robot, the robot has no opportunity to exercise an ability to think otherwise about the Kalam (in the world in which it actually exists). The robot, no matter how hard it tries, simply has no opportunity to judge the argument correctly. The programmer has causally determined this to be the case. As soon as one posits a programmer (or creator of humanity) who causally determines all humans to affirm false theological beliefs, then it makes no difference if one correctly concludes that someone baked bread in the kitchen.⁶⁰

Humans are just as necessary as God

Continuing the discussion on the compatibilist’s claim that agents always and only choose based upon their greatest desires, I made the case that if an agent always and only chooses based upon the agent’s greatest desires, then—if God is an agent—humans would be “just as necessary as God.” I also added the vital parenthetical: “(albeit with beginnings).” This raises theological issues which should make any Christian theologian worth their salt quite uncomfortable.

Bignon responds by exclaiming that this argument is a failure and adds: “First, theological compatibilists don’t have to grant that God necessarily desires to create humans; what they do say of humans is that they can be determined by God and still responsible. That doesn’t commit them to saying God is determined” (p. 35). Bignon seems to miss my point and the actual argument. Consider the 8-step argument on page 185 of my book:

1. If compatibilism is true, for any person P and action A, necessarily, if P desires to perform A and nothing prevents P from performing A, then P performs A.
2. For any person P and action A, if P necessarily desires to perform A and nothing prevents P from performing A, then P necessarily performs A.
3. Therefore, if God necessarily desires to create humans and nothing prevents God from creating humans, then God necessarily creates humans.

⁵⁹ J. Warner Wallace is a Christian apologist who is also a successful cold case murder detective. I recommend his book, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, David C. Cook, 2013.

⁶⁰ Consider another example: Ted Cruz (R) and Nancy Pelosi (D) can both cross the street to the Capitol Building just fine. However, if God has causally determined both of them to possess different “political natures,” then, they are causally determined (not “politically responsible”) to “respond to reasons” differently on political matters.

4. God necessarily desires to create humans and nothing prevents God from creating humans.
5. Therefore, God necessarily creates humans.
6. Therefore, if compatibilism is true, then it is impossible for God not to create humans.
7. Humans do not exist necessarily.
8. Therefore, compatibilism is false.

This argument, says nothing about “determinism.”⁶¹ Rather, it shows the problem with the compatibilist’s claim that one always and only chooses based upon their greatest desires. As noted in my book and on the same page: “If compatibilism is not always true for God, then it stands to reason that God could create humans in his likeness who also have the categorical ability to genuinely choose among a range of options which are all compatible with human nature. Theists, especially Christian theists, have no reason to assume compatibilistic determinism should be applied universally.”

Bignon considers biting the bullet:

But secondly, let’s say they bite the bullet and affirm that God’s decision to create is indeed broadly logically necessary. It means that humans will exist in every possible world, but that isn’t to say they are necessary beings, or as Stratton puts it, ‘just as necessary as God’ (p. 35).

Not so fast! Later in the same book Bignon is critiquing I made it clear that we are “just as necessary as God” but with a difference. Consider my words in context:

If one is committed to the impossibility of libertarian freedom, then two big problems arise: (a) Fatalism entails and (b) Humans are necessary. Why are these problematic? If fatalism is true, then God is *not* omnipotent as he simply does not have the ability to choose among a range of options consistent with his nature. On this view, God can only do one thing. He is not really omni-potent, but rather, merely uni-potent. So, if one is going to maintain orthodoxy and affirm that God is omnipotent, then he must affirm the first two premises.

What might be worse, although God is still necessary with no beginning on this “uni-potent view,” humanity ultimately becomes as necessary as God (albeit with beginnings) if the first two premises are rejected (p. 240).

I find it uncharitable at best and deceptive at worst, for Bignon to gloss over the argument and simply ignore my caveat “*albeit with beginnings*” and then attack my use of the nuanced word “necessary.” Indeed, I quote notable scholar John David Laing to support my claim (p. 240):

If [God] had to create, then in some ways he is dependent upon the creation. Under Theological Fatalism, we all become necessary beings of sorts.⁶²

⁶¹ This argument was originally crafted by John Limanto.

⁶² John D. Laing, *Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom in Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academics, 2018), 32.

Later in my book, I also quoted Jay Wesley Richards (p. 267):

[I]f choice and alternatives must be positively barred from our understanding of God's creation of the world, one should conclude that God is not even as free as we are in many situations.... The better course seems to be to retain the claim that God is free, at least with respect to some things, in the libertarian sense. God could have created a world different from the one he actually did create, or he could have created none at all.⁶³

Bignon concludes that this particular argument is “unhelpful,” but I disagree. Why is this tactic helpful? Because now, if Bignon wants to affirm this view, he must “bite the bullet” and claim that humans exist in *every* possible world (so much for God's omnipotence) exactly as we exist and that there is no possible worlds for Bignon to think or act otherwise (so much for the so-called “conditional ability” Bignon advanced earlier).

The Omni Argument

Bignon once again critiques an argument without sharing it. Since it is rather easy to attack a syllogism one cannot examine for themselves, for the convenience of those who would like to examine each premise and the overall structure of the syllogism I will share it below:

- 1- If divine determinism is true, then, if God wants all people to go to heaven, then all people go to heaven.
- 2- Not all people go to heaven.
- 3- Therefore, if God wants all people to go to heaven, then divine determinism is false.
- 4- If God is all-loving, then God wants all people to go to heaven.
- 5- God is all-loving.
- 6- Therefore, God wants all people to go to heaven.
- 7- Therefore, divine determinism is false.
- 8- God is completely sovereign and predestines all things.
- 9- Therefore, divine predestination and divine determinism are not to be conflated.
- 10- The best explanation of the data is Molinism.

This syllogism seems true apart from biblical data since the premises are implied from Perfect Being Theology (which Christians ought to affirm). Be that as it may, in my book I show that the key premises are supported via scripture as well. To my claim that “God wants all to be saved” (Jn 3:16, 1 Tim 2, Ezk 18:23), Bignon responds: “Yes, [God] has the desire to do that. Again, it doesn't follow that it's his only or ultimate purpose in the matter.”

This is why I offer a lengthy discussion on this topic later in the same chapter. One argument I offer is that if this is the way “imperfect persons feel about humanity [a desire for all humans to go to heaven], it seems intuitive that God—a perfect, morally good, and all-loving being—would at least desire the same thing” (p. 201). However, Bignon objects that I am “comparing

⁶³ Jay W. Richards, *The Untamed God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 239.

God's love with human love." But I'm simply discussing the nature of love (no matter who loves). Nevertheless, is comparing God's love with human love an inappropriate thing to do if we are created in His likeness? We can compare God's necessary/essential attributes with the contingent attributes God has granted to humanity. God has perfect power, humans have some power; God has perfect knowledge, humans have some knowledge; God is the perfect standard of love, humans are not—but we are commanded to love all people as God does.

But Bignon declares: “[C]ompatibilists need not deny that God ‘at least desires’ the same thing. There’s a false dilemma at play here. . .” (p. 36). With that said, however, I discuss the problems of appealing to God's competing desires later in the same chapter (thus, showing the dilemma is real). Bignon addresses it here:

Stratton . . . addresses this response based on God's “competing desires” as it was also offered by John Piper. Unfortunately, he criticizes it in a way that refutes his own view: “What Piper is proposing is that God is like limited, weak, and finite humans who have ‘competing desires’.” (p.202) But even on libertarianism there are two competing desires in God: saving everyone, and giving libertarian free will to everyone (p. 37).

Contra Bignon's assertion, my critique of Piper's view (and anyone else who affirms it) does not “refute my own view.” As I make clear in my book, a saving relationship *IS* a love relationship with our Creator. There is no one in Hell who loves Jesus, and there is no one in Heaven who does not love Jesus. Thus, if God has one desire, for all humans to be in a love relationship with Him, then, as I have argued in my book and in more detail on my website, God must create humanity with libertarian freedom.⁶⁴

Bignon retorts that I am “free” to say there is “only one thing that God desires, but it remains that the one sentence contains two identifiable states of affairs that God desires: ‘all humans having eternal life,’ and ‘all humans having libertarian free will,’ which God cannot both actualize, and he picks one over the other” (p. 37). Bignon, however, misses the point again and thus reaches improper conclusions. My point is that “all humans having eternal life” is equal to “all humans being in an eternal love-relationship (a marriage) with their Creator.”⁶⁵ I contend that this is an example of two different sentences that mean the same thing. And since, as I argue, *the best kind of love* requires libertarian freedom, God creates creatures who *can*, in the actual world God has created, be in an eternal love relationship (or not). This means God creates humanity with libertarian freedom. And if libertarian freedom is really free in this sense, then it follows that humanity possesses the opportunity to exercise an ability to resist God's love and grace or not.

God desires all people to freely love Him in return. That is God's greatest desire for humanity. Salvation is found in a love relationship with God, and true love requires libertarian freedom. This brings us to a conversation about Perfect Being Theology.

Speculations on perfect being theology and what brings God glory

⁶⁴ See, *The Best Kind of Love*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/the-best-kind-of-love/>, and, *Does True Love Require Libertarian Free Will: A Response to Greg Koukl*, <https://freethinkingministries.com/does-true-love-require-libertarian-free-will-a-response-to-greg-koukl/>

⁶⁵ This seems to be what CS Lewis had in mind when writing his book aptly titled, “*The Great Divorce*.”

Christians (should) affirm that God is a Maximally Great Being. This claim of knowledge might be a properly basic belief, but it is also affirmed in scripture as well as the Ontological Argument (which I discussed in the last chapter). Thus, Christians (should) affirm that God possesses the “Big 3” of “omni-attributes”: omnipotence (perfect power), omniscience (perfect knowledge), and omnibenevolence (perfectly good and all loving).

With these omni-attributes in mind, it seems that if God is omnibenevolent, then he would desire all people (created in His image) to avoid the eternal horrors of hell. If God were omnipotent, he would possess the power to stop any individual from suffering eternally in the horrors of hell. And if God were omniscient, then God would know how to use his power to stop anyone from suffering eternally in the horrors of hell. But since some people suffer eternally in the horrors of hell (which I’m sure Bignon affirms), we are now left with a problem that Molinists can answer (as I did in the final chapter of my book), while EDD folks flounder.

In response, Bignon writes: “But we’re still not told whether that desire can be overridden by another divine purpose” (p. 37). What I did explain is that what is typically offered in response as “another divine purpose” or a “competing desire” fails. So, if Bignon would like to offer this alternative divine purpose that explains exactly why God cannot have his cake and eat it too in this situation, I am all ears. If Bignon cannot do so, but the libertarian can, then this should count toward abductive conclusions regarding the better explanation of reality.

Bignon responds by asserting that God’s maximal greatness cannot be based upon “a mere a priori reflection.” He adds that this is a “clear limitation of perfect being theology,” and that the intuitions of the Christian “must then be educated by the specific record of scripture” (p. 38).

I hold an extremely high view of Scripture (it is the inspired Word of God), but I hold an even higher view of God. God is a *Maximally Great Being*. So, if I go to scripture and conclude that God is not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent, then I know I have misinterpreted Scripture. Be that as it may, I spilled much ink discussing the omni-attributes of God in my book. This included biblical data supporting one’s correct “a priori reflections.”

Be that as it may, as I explain in my book, Molinism can be inferred from Scripture and is the only view of God’s sovereignty that assumes and consistently affirms all of God’s omni-attributes. Indeed, one ought to conclude that Molinism is the best explanation of all the data.

Bignon contends that my “practice of perfect being theology” would lead to the conclusion that “God, as a maximally great being, would maximally love everyone, and hence love them equally...” To which I say, “Amen to that!” But Bignon says that the Bible is clear that God does not love (or love equally) all people. He writes: “Even if one takes Rom. 9:13 to mean God “loved less” Esau rather than “hated” him, it remains an unequal love between Jacob and Esau, that conflicts with the conclusion one would reach through Stratton’s unbridled practice of perfect being theology” (p.38).

This is an example of why it is imperative to read Scripture through the lens of God’s perfection. It appears that Bignon is committed to a wooden and literalistic interpretation of Scripture, when

there is good reason to reject such hermeneutical methods (as discussed in the first chapter of my book). Does Bignon really think that when Jesus commands humans to “hate our parents” (Luke 14:26), that He has abandoned His own “second greatest commandment” as well as the fifth of the Ten Commandments? Likewise, when the Bible uses hyperbolic language like “Esau I hated,” this does not mean that God desires Esau to suffer in the eternal holocaust of the fires of Hell. In fact, if someone even has a “little bit” of love for another, does it make any sense to think that they desire this specific person to suffer in the eternal holocaust of hell? Of course not! Be that as it may, regarding Esau and Romans 9, consider the following found on my website:

According to theologian Craig Blomberg Ph.D., in Romans 9, Paul proceeds to highlight how only a remnant of Abraham’s seed, chosen by grace, reflected the true people of God throughout Old Testament times (verses 6-29, especially 27-29). During this period, as he contrasts Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, and Esau (6-13), he is probably not talking about election to eternal salvation or damnation but about the way God’s plan for human history would work itself out in this life. **After all, Esau’s reconciliation with Jacob (Genesis 33) suggests that Esau ended his life right with God. But his seed was still not part of the chosen (corporate) nation of Israel.**⁶⁶

It is the problem of not reading Scripture through the lens of God’s perfection that leads so many Calvinists to reject God’s maximal greatness. In my book, I offer examples of Calvinists rejecting either God’s perfect power, perfect knowledge, or perfect love (if not all three of God’s omni-attributes). Red flags should be raised as this seems dangerously close to idolatry—being more committed to one’s favorite view of divine sovereignty than to the greatness of God.

I noted that “the idea that God’s glory and universal salvation are logically contradictory is far from obvious” (p.203). In response, Bignon says that “The Calvinist must simply say it’s true; it’s for Stratton to show that it’s impossible, not for the Calvinist to show that it’s obvious.” To be clear: I am not saying that it is *impossible* for the Calvinist to do so (perhaps it is), it’s just that after several centuries of trying to think of a good answer, they’ve got nothing good to offer. Molinists, on the other hand, have strong answers. With this in mind, I invite us to engage in abductive reasoning (if one possesses the opportunity to judge otherwise). What view of God’s sovereignty is the best explanation of all the data? As I proclaimed in the final sentence of my book (supported by the previous chapter and the sum of the previous 293 pages): “... since Molinism is supported by Scripture and it makes sense of and is supported by numerous apologetics-based arguments, it seems that Molinism is *probably* true. This is all to say: the inference to the best explanation of all the data is Molinism.”

Saved by the Hell

I explained how John Piper’s view of “God’s competing desires” leads to the absurd conclusion that “Jesus did NOT pay it all,” and that the “Cross was NOT enough.” This is because, as Bignon admits: “Piper had said that the reprobate contribute to the manifestation of God’s glory in judgment, and to the fact that the saved are able to “enjoy giving all credit to God.” Bignon, however, fails to see how this leads to the conclusion that “the damned are contributing to the salvation of the elect” (p. 38).

⁶⁶ See, *Free Will, Calvinism, and Romans 9* (2015): <https://freethinkingministries.com/free-will-calvinism-romans-9/>

In response, I'll just leave this here:

- 1- God must be maximally glorified.
- 2- If God creates and saves some (the “elect”), in order for God to be maximally glorified, some humans must suffer in the eternal fires of Hell (posited by Piper).
- 3- Thus, if God is to create and save some souls (the “elect”), others must suffer in the eternal fires of Hell.
- 4- Therefore, those who suffer in the eternal fires of Hell must exist in order for the elect to exist.

Molina and Mere Molinism

Bignon sums up my chapter pertaining to “mere Molinism” by noting that I am offering this view—and showing that it is open—to both Calvinists and Arminians:

But is this a realistic call to unity across the theological divide? As I understand it, Calvinism—as a philosophical position on divine providence and free will—is committed to theological determinism and compatibilism (p. 39).

And there it is. Bignon’s subjective “understanding” of Calvinism is an unnecessary assumption. I offered reasons to think that Luther, Melancthon, and Calvin rejected the view of exhaustive divine determinism—their own words (and I am not alone in that assessment)! I also referenced multiple Reformed theologians today who reject Bignon’s “understanding” that his commitment to Calvinism necessarily entails a further commitment to EDD. Moreover, even if I happen to be wrong about the Reformers of the past, and the modern-day Reformed theologians who reject Bignon’s “understanding” did not exist, I provide arguments showing that a Calvinist is not necessarily wedded to EDD. After all, there seems to be nothing logically incoherent with stating that God causally determines *some* things, but not *all* things (even though all things are predestined if God possesses middle knowledge). Be that as it may, Bignon’s faulty “understanding” of what is entailed by Calvinism and his prior commitments to this unnecessary metaphysical assumption causally determine him to affirm a false belief and keep him from truth. With this in mind, his next claim does not follow:

And unfortunately (or not!), these two are inconsistent with the first pillar of mere Molinism. So, for Calvinists like me, there is no rallying under the banner of mere Molinism, without first abandoning the theological determinism and compatibilism that made us Calvinists in the first place (p. 39).

What should make one a Calvinist “in the first place” is not a metaphysical commitment to EDD, but rather, a belief that TULIP is true. But, as I show in my book, a commitment to TULIP leaves the door open for limited libertarian freedom when it comes to non-soteriological matters.

Bignon continues:

Conversely, if someone calls himself a “Calvinist” but affirms libertarianism and accepts that God knows the truth of counterfactuals of freedom, then they qualify for “mere Molinism” indeed, but their position is what I would have called Molinism all along, so it’s not much of a revelation to suggest that they’re “mere” Molinists. That’s still Molinist enough to be wrong if you ask the Calvinist determinist (p. 40).

But not a mere 5-Point Calvinist! Only Calvinists who have a metaphysical commitment and marriage to EDD must reject mere Molinism. The mere 5-Point Calvinist, on the other hand, can also be a Mere Molinist. Typically, what most people have “called Molinism all along” is associated with Arminianism. Indeed, Bignon himself has conflated the two views in the past.⁶⁷ With this confusion in mind, there is a clear benefit by pointing out that Molinism is not a soteriological view (unlike Calvinism), but that it can be applied to salvation issues (or not). That, it seems to me, should be the focus of the debate.

Bignon goes on to note that the arguments I offer in favor of mere Molinism are sound if my previous arguments for libertarian freedom succeed. He offered objections to my arguments, and I have countered with defeaters (Bignon also tacitly affirmed the FAAN). So, if the arguments for libertarian freedom stand (it seems to me that they do), Bignon offers another endorsement of sorts: “[G]iven that starting point, I agree that Molinism is quite defensible. God knows the truth of counterfactuals of freedom, from which Molinism follows, if libertarianism is true” (p. 40).

Since I have defended my arguments for limited libertarian freedom and against EDD (the objections raised by Bignon), Bignon should become a Calvinist who affirms mere Molinism!

Contingent compatibilism

Bignon also notes that a particular section of the “mere Molinism” chapter that might be “relevant to Calvinists is Stratton’s argument that God must have middle knowledge even if he never creates anyone with libertarian freedom in the actual world” (p. 41). Indeed, I argue that “If God is omnipotent, he possesses the ability to create a world including humans who possess limited libertarian freedom, even if he never does” (p.237), and that “If God is omniscient, he possesses perfect knowledge of how humans who possess libertarian freedom would choose if he were to create them, and even if he never creates them” (p.238). Bignon responds: “The problem with this appeal for Calvinists to affirm mere Molinism without libertarian freedom in the actual world, is that the proposal is incoherent.”

That’s incorrect. At this point, the proposal is not for Calvinists to affirm mere Molinism, but rather, for the Calvinist to merely affirm God’s middle knowledge of CCFs even if the actual world is fully explained via determinism.

The Quiz

I close my chapter on “mere Molinism” with the “Calvinist quiz” (p. 252-253): six questions aimed at Calvinists. Bignon does not share my questions in his review. They are important for anyone who is following along to consider:

⁶⁷ I point this out in the final chapter of my book.

1. Did Satan possess the categorical ability to rebel or not rebel against God? (This question can be rephrased: Did God causally determine Satan to rebel?)
2. Did Adam and Eve possess the categorical ability to eat or not eat of the forbidden fruit? (This question can be rephrased: Did God causally determine Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit?)
3. Do unregenerate sinners have the categorical ability to choose among a range of sinful thoughts and actions? (This question can be rephrased: Does God causally determine each specific sin?)
4. Do Christians possess the categorical ability to choose to either sin or to resist temptation in thought and action as per 1 Cor 10:13? (This question can be rephrased: Does God causally determine Christians to sin?)
5. Do Christians have the categorical ability to choose between reading a red Bible or a blue Bible? (If John Piper were to choose to read a red Bible, could he have genuinely chosen otherwise and read the blue Bible?)
6. Do Christians possess the categorical ability to deliberate and rationally infer and affirm claims of knowledge such as, “Calvinism is a better explanation than Molinism,” or “Molinism is the inference to the best explanation”? (This question can be rephrased: Does God causally determine some Christians to affirm false beliefs?)

Bignon responds by saying that “Calvinists should say ‘no’ to all of these, and nothing bad follows from that” (p. 42). It seems to me, however, that the Calvinist “should” not, and does not need to say “no” to all of these questions. Only those who are committed to the strange metaphysical view of EDD “should” say no (not that they have an opportunity to do otherwise).

To those who are willing to think otherwise, consider the following: Bignon says that the Calvinist “should” affirm that God causally determined Satan to rebel. If you find this absurd, then you *should* reject Bignon’s view. Bignon says that God causally determined Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. If you find this absurd, then you *should* reject Bignon’s view. Bignon says that God causally determined each specific sin (and thus, God causally determined the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Hitler’s Holocaust, and every single kidnapping, rape, and murder that has ever occurred). If you find this absurd, then you *should* reject Bignon’s view. Bignon says that God causally determines each and every instance a Christian sins. If you find this absurd, then you *should* reject Bignon’s view. Bignon says that God causally determines Bignon to affirm false beliefs (how does he know this is not one of those instances?). If you find this absurd, then you *should* reject Bignon’s view.

Fortunately, most people—even many Calvinists—will see the absurdity of Bignon’s metaphysical commitment to EDD (which goes far beyond 5-point Calvinism). This sets up my encounter with an unnamed but well-known Reformed theologian, who responded “yes” to all of these (and “no” to the parenthetical questions). Bignon writes: “Stratton declared [the Reformed theologian] a Molinist. Yes. That’s what I would call him too. We don’t need six questions to diagnose that someone who affirms any libertarian choice is not a Calvinist determinist.”

Tell that to the Reformed theologian who adamantly affirms, advances, and argues for all 5-points of Calvinism! The problem is clear: Bignon *assumes* that the 5 points of Calvinism entail

EDD. But that is far from obvious. Indeed, as I make clear in my book, the 5 points of Calvinism are logically compatible with the 2 pillars of mere Molinism.

Apologetic Significance

The final chapter of my book demonstrates “the apologetic significance of Molinism.” Bignon criticized William Lane Craig’s endorsement of my book on the back cover, noting that Craig had said this chapter was “worth the price of admission alone.” Bignon responds with what he has already made clear: “I’m once more at a loss to see why. The material in this chapter is mostly confused, and another import from Stratton’s blog, to which the price of admission is thus, ironically, zero” (p. 42).

Context is key. After William Lane Craig heard me present the paper providing *some* of the content of my final chapter (not all of it), he immediately came to the front of the room and said, “*Tim, you are living my dream! It’s always been my dream to have someone take my work, expand upon it, make it their own, and run with it. This seems to be exactly what you are doing.*” Dr. Craig also invited me to present this paper at his Defenders Sunday School in January 2020. Since most of these arguments are part of Dr. Craig’s “cumulative case,” perhaps this ought to get Bignon’s attention when Bignon claims that the material of this chapter is “mostly confused.” Indeed, we shall soon see (à la Plantinga) where the confusion “really lies.”

As an aside: the paper I read at the conference was a paper based on my dissertation (not the other way around). I then took the liberty to share the paper on my website before my book was published (as I did the same with several other articles). Be that as it may, there is much more to the final chapter than the paper I presented at the conference, at Dr. Craig’s Defenders Class, or that was previously offered on my website (it is no longer available). Thus, the price of admission is not, “ironically, zero” (but it is only \$9.99 on Kindle).

Bignon begins by advancing the cause of atheism by attempting to debunk my arguments explaining why a maximally great being would allow pain, evil, and suffering. Interestingly, the French philosopher “abandons the battlefield” and fails to write one word interacting with the argument that I perceived to be the strongest. Be that as it may, Bignon is clear:

But yes, determinism means God determines all things, and that includes Hitler’s actions. The Calvinist of course disagrees that determinism entails God is “ultimately to blame” for evil, and Stratton doesn’t offer any further argument in support of that transfer of blame, nor does he interact even a little with modern, detailed treatments of evil by Calvinist philosophers, so there isn’t much to respond to (p. 43).

Sure there is! I’ve read the literature and I see nothing that can defeat the arguments I offered. Speaking of arguments, the one I considered to be the strongest (conveniently ignored by Bignon in his review) demonstrates how Molinism is the only view of God’s sovereignty that can make sense of *all kinds* of evil (as opposed to merely moral evil). Consider the following (p. 262):

R1 - If God is omnibenevolent, then he desires genuine eternal love relations with humans.

R2 - If God desires genuine eternal love relations with humans, then he creates humans with libertarian freedom (because): *R2a - A genuine eternal love relationship between God and humans necessarily requires that humans possess libertarian freedom.*

R3 - If God creates humans with libertarian freedom, then he allows humans to experience suffering (because): *R3a - Suffering can result from libertarian free humans. R3b – God created a world in which he knew that unless he permitted natural evil, some would not freely choose to eternally preserve the suffering-free state of affairs in the new heavens and new earth (2 Cor. 4:17).*

R4 - God is omnibenevolent.

R5 - Therefore, God allows humans to experience suffering.

As noted in my book: “The above syllogism makes use of all three of the essential ingredients of the *soteriological view* of Molinism. In fact, no competing views of God’s sovereignty have logical access to this specific argument.” With that in mind, what view should be inferred as the best explanation of all the data? A view that can explain all the pain, evil, and suffering we all experience in this world (Molinism), or a view that God causally determines all the pain, evil, and suffering we experience in this world and that the damned experience for eternity (EDD)?

Molinism FTW! I even referenced Bignon (although I misspelled “Guillaume”—sorry about that) to strengthen this point. Consider his own words:

Arminianism [which Bignon conflates with Molinism] is better-off than Calvinism to answer the atheist argument from evil against God’s existence. I do affirm that . . . the libertarian has a resource against the problem of evil that the compatibilist cannot use. That, of course, doesn’t mean that Arminianism is overall better, only that it’s more useful at rejecting the problem of evil. It’s a strength of Arminianism [Molinism] I recognize. (p.263).⁶⁸

Regarding my use of his words, Bignon complained that I “truncated the qualifier (to a certain extent) which stood right before those words in that very sentence, a qualifier which explicitly limited the scope of my positive appraisal of Arminianism” (p. 44). Bignon shared the following:

That limit was also made most clear by the very next words that followed the quoted portion but were not included. They went like this: “It’s a strength of Arminianism I recognize. I just think “being false” is a weakness which on balance makes Arminianism less than ideal.” I’m essentially saying Arminianism wins a Pyrrhic victory, and Stratton reports something like “Bignon admits ‘Arminianism wins a . . . victory’.” I suppose it’s true enough, but not quite the original message.

I’m good enough with “true enough.” Bottom line: Bignon affirms that libertarians have access to defeat what is probably known as the greatest objection raised against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5), and exhaustive divine determinists do not. This should count as something to consider when making an inference to the best explanation of all the data.

⁶⁸ Guillaume Bignon, *A Response to Kevin Timpe’s Objections*, <http://www.associationaxiome.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Response-to-Kevin-Timpe.pdf> (Date of Access: 14 Mar. 2019).

For the sake of time and space, I am not going to address each of Bignon's mistakes he made addressing this final chapter (they were legion). I would be happy to discuss these elsewhere. As for now, let me adjourn this "review of Bignon's review" by examining his critique of my claim that the Fine-Tuning Argument entails divine middle knowledge.

The Fine-Tuning Argument infers the existence of God based upon the intelligent design of the initial conditions of the early universe (the big bang) to permit life in the universe today (billions of years later). As Bignon notes, "the physics involved are such that if those initial conditions had been even slightly different, then life would not have been possible anywhere in the universe." He then adds: "Stratton seizes on that counterfactual language . . ." (p. 47).

Indeed, this "seizing" is justified. Consider the words from my book:

This has great significance and relevance to Molinism, which explains that God possesses certain knowledge of what would occur in possible worlds if he were to fine-tune the initial conditions of the early universe with all the "special numbers" referenced (and more) and actualize this certain possible world. This also entails that God would possess perfect counterfactual knowledge—not grounded in anything that actually exists—about what kind of non-life permitting universes would have come into existence if any of those numbers were slightly altered (a different possible world would have been the actual world) (p.273).

Bignon claims that I am "confused," because this counter-factual knowledge God possesses logically prior to his creative decree (not to mention prior to actual creation) is "not counterfactuals of libertarian freedom; their truth is a pure consequence of the physical properties involved, so they don't require Molinist middle knowledge at all."

Au contraire! This is knowledge—not based upon anything that actually exists—about "what *would* happen *if*" God created one way instead of another (or did not create at all). What God knows in this case is included under the banner of God's middle knowledge. Don't just take my word for it, consider the words of one of the leading Molinist scholars in the world today which, by the way, was included (but ignored) in this section of my book. Kirk MacGregor writes:

Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of all things that would happen in every possible set of circumstances, both things that are determined to occur by those circumstances and things that are not determined to occur by those circumstances.⁶⁹

What Bignon fails to grasp is that middle knowledge includes, but is not limited to, "counterfactuals of libertarian freedom." He adds: "Calvinists obviously affirm counterfactuals about the physics of the universe, and they even affirm counterfactuals of freedom, they just deny human freedom is libertarian" (p. 47). Of course, Bignon's prior commitment to EDD determines him to deny that humans possess libertarian freedom in the actual world God created. Be that as it may, if it is even *possible* for an omnipotent God to create humans with libertarian freedom, then an omniscient God possesses knowledge of the CCFs of humans he never created but could have. Bignon argues: "You don't need middle-knowledge to know that "if gravity were

⁶⁹ Kirk MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 2015, 11.

stronger, objects would fall faster,” any more than you need middle-knowledge to know that “if I were American, I would have the right to vote in the United States” (p. 47).

Bignon is now conflating God’s knowledge of what “would happen if” *logically prior* to God’s creative decree with mere counterfactual knowledge humans possess. There is a big difference and since Bignon fails to grasp these vital points, he fails in offering a coherent objection.

Bignon exclaims: “Counterfactual knowledge doesn’t entail Molinism” (p. 47). It does, however, entail middle knowledge if God possesses counterfactual knowledge logically prior to His creative decree. That’s exactly what makes counterfactual knowledge, middle knowledge. That’s exactly what we are discussing here. Bignon continues:

It’s quite a different thing to say Molinism is compatible with the argument, from saying it’s demanded by it. It’s not demanded. So, yes, the fine-tuning argument is compatible with Molinism. And with Calvinism. And with simple-foreknowledge Arminianism. And with open theism. Which means Molinism has no apologetic relevance to the fine-tuning argument” (p. 48).

For Calvinists who affirm God’s middle knowledge (divine knowledge of “*what would happen if*” God chose to create one way or another logically prior to the creative decree), yes, these folks have access to the Fine-Tuning Argument. However, this argument is not rationally accessible for the many Calvinists who deny divine middle knowledge (one of the two essential pillars of mere Molinism). Moreover, for those in the simple-foreknowledge camp, simply knowing what *will* happen does not give God any special sovereignty over what will happen. The Open Theist who demands that the Grounding Objection cannot affirm God’s knowledge of what *would happen if* the initial conditions of the big bang would have been fine-tuned otherwise (because this knowledge is not based upon anything that actually exists) also does not have consistent access to the Fine-Tuning Argument. As my book explains, Molinism is the best explanation.

Bignon concludes his 50-page rebuke of my book by exclaiming: “I do not recommend this book” (p. 50). Bignon is entitled to his opinion. Alternatively, I do encourage all free thinkers to read his book, then read my book, then read Bignon’s “review” of my book, and then read this 50-page rejoinder. If one has failed to read any of these, they are ill-informed on this matter.

What some may find surprising is that I am thankful for Bignon’s “extremely negative assessment” (to use his own words). It has offered the opportunity to provide clarity on a few important points and to strengthen the main arguments found within my book. This is a wonderful display of what can happen when two brothers in Christ disagree and enter the arena to interact with each other’s own words with the goal of moving toward truth. Indeed, this is the epitome of “iron sharpening iron” (Proverbs 27:17).⁷⁰

⁷⁰ I am grateful for conversations or written comments (both positive and critical) on some version of this paper to Jacobus Erasmus, Kelly Fitzsimmons Burton, Ben Whittington, Michael DeVito, David Pallmann, Patrick Henderson, Scott Olson, Adam Coleman, Jonathan Thompson, Jonathan Noyes, Eric Hernandez, Stelman Smith, and my super-cool parents (Russ and Suzanne Stratton).