Theological Compatibilism & Animation: Vessel of Wrath

by Nathan Gilder

View the animated sequence in AVI or MOV.

Abstract

Vessel of Wrath is a study of the traditional controversy of freewill and determinism that has been debated by theologians and philosophers for centuries. The project explores a philosophy that reconciles both sides of the common arguments from the theological viewpoint established by St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin.

The two-minute animation features three characters; an artist, Lucius Zimmerman, and two characters of his design, including a bird that lacks the ability for self-reflection and a human-like creature that appears to have a will. The artist determines the characters' actions, however, because the creature with human form has a separate will, self-realization, and does not feel coerced into making decisions. Two separate planes of reality are established -- one for the artist and another for the animated beings. Vessel of Wrath does not attempt to defend or completely explain theological compatibilism; it is simply an investigation of the subject as a philosophy from the Judeo-Christian perspective. Due to its brevity, the animation only serves to present the conceptual framework of the philosophy and will retain the mystery and complexity of issues such as who is responsible for the animated characters' actions and the ethical right of the artist to
manipulate the medium.

*Vessel of Wrath* was primarily developed using Alias' Maya software application. Lucius was modeled with Subdivision Surfaces and required the use of wrap deformers, cluster deformers, and blend targets for animation. I developed a Forward Kinematic-Inverse Kinematic blending system for the arm movement and used custom attributes to establish the motion and deformation of his facial expressions, hand gestures, foot placement, and cloth movement. Color, bump, and specular maps for the artist character were painted in Adobe Photoshop and procedural shaders were used to texture his studio chair. Lucius' sequences were rendered with the MentalRay engine and used Low Dynamic Range Imaging for the environment lighting.

The human-like creature and bird used rigging techniques similar to those used for the artist, including FK/IK blending rigs on the arms and wings. To recreate a two-dimensional cartoon style for their sequences, I designed Maya Paint Effects brushes and applied them to the geometry using TomCat's Maya Shader plug-in. To assist in the animation process I also created a Maya Embedded Language script that served as a shortcut to defining key types and selecting attributes of the characters that could be animated. The final rendered sequences were edited and composited with Adobe After Effects and Digidesign ProTools was used for developing the 5.1 surround sound mix.

**Introduction**

1. Behind all animated characters is a creator: an individual who designs, produces, and manipulates the existence of all roles, circumstances, and even psychological journeys within the emotions and thoughts of those characters. Narrative storytellers before the twentieth century were generally recognized through literature, and perhaps the writers of past stories did place themselves within the narrative as one who could engage in relationships with fictional characters, but a reader would be unaware of such a motive unless it was explicitly stated. It wasn't until the advent of compositing animation with live-action film that the notion of a direct relationship between the artist and a fictional character that appeared to have an individual will could be effectively realized. This relationship, found within the animation process, is a representation of the philosophy of theological compatibilism—a philosophy where two beings, specifically a determinative creator and his creation, are allowed to have separate wills that join to produce a single action while the specific intentions of each mind can be different or even opposed.

**The Animator-Animation Relationship**

2. The relationship of the animator and his creations has been a topic of interest since the process of animation was first explored in the nineteenth century. The ability to produce moving drawings was (and still is) amazing, but when artists began introducing work that appeared to interact with them on a personal level (when the cartoon seemed to react and participate in conversation or happenings with the animator) they brought forth a revolutionary method of storytelling that was previously unachievable. Animation is unarguably the most effective way to discuss certain philosophical issues because it allows the artist to have control
over the worlds in which the issues are raised. Many philosophical viewpoints have been represented through animation, but I would argue that all cartoons are inherently compatibilist. And, any cartoon character that appears to interact with its creator via an apparent "freewill" that is bound to that of the animator's effectively parallels the basics of theological compatibilism. However, the philosophical relationship between the artist and their chosen medium is not limited to animation. All works of art may be seen from either the perspective of the artist or the creation. The primary difference between an animation and a still image or items such as ceramic pots, and an animation is that the animation more clearly illustrates an object that appears to have a will of its own. It is difficult to imagine a pot as having a will because it does not move or change by volition; rather it is acted upon by its environment or other outside circumstances from our point-of-view.

The Animated Creature

3. The nature of the human will and the circumstances that move it to action have been a subject of great debate for centuries within both the secular and religious realms. The philosophical doctrine of determinism says that every state of affairs, including every human event, act, and decision is the inevitable consequence of antecedent states of affairs. Compatibilism, also known as "soft determinism" and most famously championed by the philosopher David Hume, is a theory which holds that free will and determinism are compatible. According to Hume, free will should not be understood as an absolute ability to have chosen differently under exactly the same inner and outer circumstances. Rather, it is a hypothetical ability to have chosen differently if one had been psychologically disposed by another system of beliefs or desires. Hume also maintained that free acts are not uncaused, but caused by our choices as determined by our beliefs, desires, and by our characters. While a decision-making process exists within Hume's determinism, this process is governed by a causal chain of events. For example, a person may make the decision to read this paper, but that decision is determined by the conditions that existed prior to the decision being made. Theological compatibilism, a framework that holds parallels to the basic tenants put forth by Hume, is a philosophy that has existed since the Old Testament of the Bible was written as can be demonstrated by various examples throughout it. The obvious difference between theological and secular compatibilism is that theological compatibilism places the determinative role within God and not the physical world. Theologians such as St. Augustine of Hippo addressed the topic of man's bondage to sin with the ability to make choices that reflected the sinful nature. In The Bondage of the Will, Martin Luther writes with the same concept in mind and this theology is what spurred him to begin the Protestant Reformation during the 16th century. John Calvin would later expound upon the relationship of God's eternal decree (also known as sovereignty through providence) and the idea of man's freewill in his book The Institutes of Christian Religion, published in 1536. On the topic of freewill specifically, these men agreed that people make choices, but any decision that is made flows from the disposition of the individual
making the choice. They agreed that it was God who ultimately decides the nature of a man and controls all actions by him, and this concept refers back directly to the Scriptures where their theology originated. It's also here that the compatibilist relationship between the animator and his characters may be explored.

4. A great number of similarities emerge when comparing the interrelationship between God and man to the interrelationship between the animator and his animation. For instance, 1) The artist is more detailed and "real" than the characters he creates; 2) There is a difference in space and time for the artist and the creation. The artist is able to see and understand all moments in the plot that he has created, often including "future" moments that have not yet been physically defined on paper for the character to experience. The character is bound in its understanding because it only knows the world that has been created for it. Within a linear timeline the creature is unaware of future possibilities until they are able to be reflected upon as past occurrences, unless the creator has chosen to foreshadow or reveal future events; 3) The character is of a lower dimension than the animator in terms of knowledge and understanding; 4) The character can only do that which the artist has enabled and allowed it to do. The creation is entirely reliant upon the creator for existence and nourishment. Without the creator, the creation lacks the ability to function—an animation cannot add frames to itself. And finally; 5) The creator has the freedom and ability to do as he pleases with his creation.

5. The animator is the creator, ruler, and determining factor of the events in the work produced. The character(s) within the work, if they are conscious beings able to explore their own views of the situations in which they were placed, could be understood as willful agents making choices that, in essence, drive the events because they result from conscious decisions. The primary interest of theological compatibilism is to understand the two perspectives of an occurrence, and the artist/animation metaphor effectively accomplishes this feat.

The Compatibilist Relationship in Animation History

6. The idea of designing an independent mind for a cartoon entity has been present since the moving drawings first originated. Animators such as Winsor McCay, the Fleischer Brothers, Jack King, Otto Messner, and Chuck Jones pioneered the development of creator/cartoon interaction which relied upon the exclusive wills of those involved. These animators addressed the animation process itself—the development and movement of a character—and how that may produce an antagonistic relationship between the artist and the drawings. Inspiration for conveying the "conflict" between the animator and his animation stemmed from the earliest surviving American animated film, *Humorous Funny Faces*[^10] by J. Stuart Blackton, and by French avant-garde animations such as *Fantasmagorie*[^11] by Emile Cohl. *The Hand of the Artist*, written and animated by Walter Booth in 1906, is a three minute animation wherein lifelike portraits are drawn by the "Hand" and then the characters come to life, embrace and dance a cakewalk. Other surprising effects follow in rapid succession as the Hand produces new wonders.
After each subject plays its part, the Hand crumples up the paper and dispenses it in the form of confetti. The Fleischers' Koko the Clown would interact, annoy, and sometimes torture the animator, and when the animator was not present, Koko would wreak havoc upon his studio. Jack King's short animation A Cartoonist's Nightmare parallels Vessel of Wrath in that King creates a world where the animator himself is a cartoon character. Working late in the studio one night, the animator falls asleep at his drawing table when suddenly the villains he was animating grab him, pull him into their world and begin torturing him. It isn't until after Beans, the long-forgotten co-star of Porky Pig, comes and rescues him that he wakes up to discover it was a dream (but that doesn't stop the animator from rewarding the cartoon cat by drawing him an ice cream feast to enjoy).

7. Winsor McCay is famous not only for the quality and detail of his cartoons, but also his inventiveness in terms of the concept and technology of animation. His earliest animations showed him drawing characters and as he was doing so they would come to life, usually doing things such as walking cycles and other basic movements. One of his most influential cartoons, Gertie the Dinosaur, is a story about McCay and his pet brontosaurus. In the film, Winsor McCay interacts with the cartoon dinosaur by giving commands to it as he would a dog. The viewer sees this exchange of action and is led to believe that the two characters, McCay and Gertie, exist in a single moment when it is obvious that McCay animated the creature and then filmed himself interacting with a projection of it. This compositing of live-action with animation has spurred numerous films dealing with similar concepts, most famous of which is Who Framed Roger Rabbit, and while compatibilist freedom can be explored within these examples, they cannot begin to compare with Trials of a Movie Cartoonist by Otto Messner and most especially Duck Amuck by Chuck Jones.

8. In Trials of a Movie Cartoonist, Otto Messner sits at his studio table and begins to draw some characters. The surprise comes when, as he is drawing them, the characters begin to rebel and refuse to do what he wants them to do. They contradict him, insisting that he has no right to make slaves of them, even if he is their creator. This is another example of the animator allowing himself to appear out of control, unable to define the actions of his creations because they appear to have a will that is entirely free. Such is not the case for Daffy Duck in Duck Amuck.

9. Chuck Jones' Duck Amuck, created in 1953, is one of the most thorough examples of theological compatibilist freedom within an animated being. This seven minute animation stars Daffy Duck as a character whose existence is dictated by Bugs Bunny, who plays the role of the animator. The reactions that Daffy has towards Bug's doings reflect his fundamental disposition in that he is continually complaining and trying to get by with the circumstances handed to him. The entire short is based on the interaction between the animator and the seeming freewill of Daffy. But, if Daffy is being drawn as an animation, given body and costume, as well as situations to act in, what is left but his personality, or heart? When he is erased from the screen, he is still able to voice his opinion because his mind and his body are treated as separate by Jones, only the latter of which is controlled by the artist. When Daffy wishes to speak in outrage, but instead is left
with bird calls, his facial expression shows that he knew in his heart what he
would have said, and he even tried to say it, but only that which the artist allowed
to come forth was made audible. This brings up the fact that Daffy has a mind that
is even separate from the voice. If the screen was completely blank and there was
no sound, Daffy would not cease to exist because his mind or spirit is still present.
[19] Bugs Bunny has sovereign control over his animation, holding his purposes
and desires in priority over those of the characters that are manipulated within the
animated world. [20]
10. Notes

[1] Animation yields complete control over the mise-en-scene. The filmmaker can
design and draw literally anything, whether it resembles something in the real world or comes strictly out of his or her imagination. Thus there is a vast range of possibilities for animated films." D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, Film Art McGraw-Hill, USA, 1993, p.417.

[2] The will of the animator is present regardless if he is not explicitly depicted. Here I am speaking in terms of the "real" animation process, not an illustration of the process as in Vessel of Wrath. All character design processes include the creation of a new will that may act differently than the animator would in terms of his own reality.


[6] See examples in Appendix A.

[7] St. Augustine began a tradition of debates among theologians by confronting Pelagius on the topic of God's sovereignty in the salvation, original sin, and the bondage of man's will to sin (http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF1-05/TOC.htm).

[8] The Bondage of the Will was written in response to Erasmus, a man who followed in the footsteps of Pelagius by declaring that original sin did not affect the seed of Adam. Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will (Reprint Edition), Revel, New York, NY, 1990.

[9] It is important to note, however, that John Calvin was less interested in exploring the freewill/determinism issues than his predecessors; Calvin spent more time dealing with practical Christian topics such as prayer and daily devotion. John Calvin, The Institutes of Christian Religion (Reprint), Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990. Also see John Calvin's Bible commentaries at http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html.

[10] "This earliest surviving American animated film--in the strict sense of single exposures of drawings simulating movement--uses chalkboard sketches and then cut-outs to simplify the process. The opening title, animated with bits of paper, repeats a trick seen the previous year in Edison films... The flickering seen here was common to the earliest animation and resulted from the camera operator's failure to achieve consistent exposure in manual one-frame cranking." United States Historical Archive, http://www.ushistoricalarchive.com/, 2001. J. Stuart Blackton, Humorous Funny Faces, Vitagraph, 1906.

[11] "Cohl with his Fanasmagorie forges an illusion, but disabuses viewers too. Through the intervention of the artist's hand, through the knowing play of surface and depth, and through an acknowledgement of screen, simulation, and situation, Cohl reveals the derivation of the over-lively objects." Esther Leslie, Hollywood
"Koko knew that he was made of ink—and in the early days his story was often one of the struggle for corporeal existence. The show started typically with the animator's hand drawing Koko from a few inkblots. Then Max Fleischer is seen at work in the studio. Action cuts between the studio and the cartoon world, until the story takes off, playing with the different planes and realities, further confusing things by creating illusions of depth through exaggerated perspective drawing." Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, Verso, New York, NY, 2002, pp 13-14. Dave and Max Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell Films starring Koko the Clown*, Paramount Pictures, 1927-1929.


"[The] manipulation of Daffy's image and identity also tells an audience about his essential character traits—egotism, ambition, frustration, anger, and willfulness. These traits are constantly challenged in most of the narratives involving Daffy by the resistance offered up by that world around him." Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Routledge, London, NY, 1998, pp 41.

"Daffy is then erased by an animated pencil rubber and essentially only remains as a voice, but as Chuck Jones has pointed out, 'what I want to say is that Daffy can live and struggle on in an empty screen, without setting and without sound, just as well as with a lot of arbitrary props. He remains Daffy Duck.'" Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, pp 40.

"Daffy is visibly humiliated and his attitude once again reveals to an audience his helplessness in the face of the power of the animator. The animator is at liberty to completely manipulate the image and create impossible and dynamic relations which need not ave any connection with orthodox and anticipated relations." Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, pp 41.

11. References


12. **Appendix: EXAMPLES OF BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL COMPATIBILISM**

Romans 9:10-24:

10 Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father
Isaac.
11 Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad in order that God's purpose in election might stand:
12 not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger."
13 Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."
14 What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!
15 For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."
16 It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.
17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."
18 Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.
19 One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"
20 But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"
21 Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?
22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?
23 And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory,
24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Proverbs 16:1: To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.
Proverbs 16:4: The LORD works out everything for His own purposes—even the wicked for a day of disaster.
Proverbs 16:9: In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.
Proverbs 16:33: The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.
Proverbs 20:24: A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?
Proverbs 21:1: The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases.
Isaiah 10:5-16:
5 "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,
in whose hand is the club of my wrath!

6 I send him against a godless nation,
I dispatch him against a people who anger me,
to seize loot and snatch plunder,
and to trample them down like mud in the streets.

7 But this is not what he intends,
this is not what he has in mind;
his purpose is to destroy,
to put an end to many nations."

12 When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. 13 For he says:

"By the strength of my hand I have done this,
and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.
I removed the boundaries of nations,
I plundered their treasures;
like a mighty one I subdued their kings."

15 Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it,
or the saw boast against him who uses it?
As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up,
or a club brandish him who is not wood!
16 Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors;
under his pomp a fire will be kindled
like a blazing flame...

Genesis 50:15-20:

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" 16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept.

18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

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