

The Freewill Issue in Theological Perspective

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Abstract: The freewill/determinism issue has not been a concern solely of secular metaphysicians and philosophers of law. Theologians also have wrestled with this intractable problem. The present paper considers the three major approaches to the issue as presented in Western theology: that of Roman Catholicism/Protestant Arminianism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism. A sound theological approach is seen to have distinct advantages over against secular treatments, both in general terms and in the sphere of legal philosophy.

Part One of the *The Oxford Handbook of Freewill* is devoted to “Theology and Fatalism.”¹ The *Handbook* quite properly recognises the place of freewill discussions in the history of Christian theology and their potential value to the analysis of that crucial issue in other domains such as legal theory. The purpose of this essay is to outline the positions classically taken on the freewill issue in Christian dogmatics and to see whether they can shed light on the freewill/determinism controversy in general.

Before presenting the theological alternatives, however, it may be worthwhile to observe the state of the question in secular thought. On the one hand, it seems logical to assume that the genetic makeup of the individual covers all aspects of his or her actions; were we to have a complete map of that genetic situation in the case of any given person, we could presumably predict all of that individual’s life decisions.

However, such a deterministic conclusion flies in the face of our need to establish responsibility for human action—particularly in the case of antisocial behaviour, where one can hardly be allowed to push responsibility back upon one’s progenitors and thereby avoid the consequences of one’s acts. To take but one legal example, the French *Cour de cassation* in the important *Laboube* case declared:

¹ Robert Kane (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Freewill* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

“Encore faut-il, conformément aux principes généraux du droit, que le mineur dont la participation à l’acte matériel à lui reproché est établi, *ait compris et voulu cet acte*; toute infraction, même non intentionnelle, suppose en effet que son auteur *ait agi avec intelligence et volonté*”²

In short, in spite of herculean efforts to arrive at rational compatibility between genetic determinism and freely chosen human actions,³ the paradox remains: in theory, our acts are predetermined, yet in practice we must take personal responsibility for them in order to maintain a functioning civilised society. Einstein put it succinctly: “I am a determinist, compelled to act as if free will existed, because if I wish to live in a civilized society, I must act responsibly. I know philosophically a murderer is not responsible for his crimes, but I prefer not to take tea with him.”⁴

The Three Classic Theological Approaches

The history of Christian thought has provided three major understandings of the relationship between divine providence and human freedom: the Roman Catholic/Arminian view; the Calvinist view; and the Lutheran view.⁵ Notably, since the *point de départ* of Christian theology is divine revelation rather than human speculation, these approaches are not general attempts to resolve the destiny/freewill issue, but focus (as does Holy Scripture) on the matter of personal

² Crim. 13 déc. 1956, *Recueil Dalloz*, 1957.349, note Patin (italics ours). “It is still necessary, in conformity with the general principles of law, that the minor whose participation in the *actus reus* has been established, should have understood and willed this act; every offence, even non-intentional ones, suppose in effect that its author has acted with intelligence and will.”

³ One of the most striking is the argument for psychological dualism/interactionism by Nobel prize winning neurophysiologist Sir John C. Eccles: “If my uniqueness of self is tied to the genetic uniqueness that built my brain, then the odds against myself existing in my experienced uniqueness are 10^{10,000} against” (Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain* (New York: Springer International, 1985), p. 559.

⁴ Albert Einstein, quoted in Denis Brian, *Einstein: A Life* (New York: John Wiley, 1996), p. 185. Quantum theory, to be sure, does not support such determinism. “As in Newton’s world, the actors in Einstein’s world parrot their lines from a script that was written beforehand. But in a quantum play, the actors suddenly throw away the script and act on their own. The puppets cut their strings. Free will has been established” (Michio Kaku, *Parallel Worlds* (New York: Random House Anchor Books, 2006), p. 149. Einstein would of course reply that without consistent physical laws, one could not establish the soundness of quantum theory in the first place.

⁵ A valuable historical survey of western Christian approaches to the freewill issue (though lacking in sympathy for Protestant viewpoints and appreciation for the logical irreconcilability of the Lutheran approach with the classic Roman Catholic position) is Bernard Quilliet, *L’Acharnement théologique: Histoire de la grâce en Occident IIIe-XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

salvation. The question for the theologians has been “What, in the final analysis, accounts for the saved person being saved, and what accounts for the unbeliever remaining in his or her unbelief?” The following diagram sets forth the three classic positions:

Election/Predestination and Freewill in Human Salvation

	<u>RC/Arminian</u>	<u>Lutheran</u>	<u>Calvinist</u>
<i>The Saved</i>	Election Freewill	Election Freewill	Election Freewill
<i>The Unsaved</i>	Election Freewill	Election Freewill	Election Freewill

Several clarifications are immediately necessary to make this conceptualisation understandable. These are best presented by way of the three confessional positions represented in the chart.

The Roman Catholic view has always emphasised the controlling place of the human will in salvation. God’s grace alone provided the means of human salvation through the gift of His Son Jesus Christ, but to benefit from this gift one must exercise his or her freewill—by personally accepting the Church’s sacramental provisions whereby the “treasury of Christ’s merits” becomes available to those who repent and agreeing to the penitential ministries of the Church as the extension of Christ’s body in history. An interesting recent illustration of this viewpoint is seen in a comment by Monseignor Ravasi, prefect of the Ambrosian Library, Milan, and member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, when asked why Judas’ betrayal of Jesus has been included in the

recent revision of the Stations of the Cross; said he: “The episode shows that we all have been given free will and a conscience.”⁶

The freewill explanation of both salvation and damnation has also been maintained by the followers of Dutch Protestant theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), who developed his position over against that of the strict Calvinism of his time. It is also represented by the so-called “Freewill Methodists,” “Freewill Baptists,” and Arminian Evangelicals who assert a direct causal relationship between making a “decision for Christ” and salvation.

Polar opposite to the Roman Catholic/Arminian view is that of classic Calvinism, which holds that the efficient cause of both salvation and of damnation is the “election” (i.e., decision) of God in eternity. Predestinarian Calvinism comes in two varieties: “supralapsarian” (God’s decision preceded even the Fall of man) and “infralapsarian” (that decision was not made until after our first parents sinned).

Not all Calvinists by any means take these positions today. A number of Presbyterian church bodies have removed the predestination article from the text of the Westminster Confession of Faith (a prime Calvinist doctrinal statement). Historically, the French Calvinist theologian Moïse Amyraut or Amyraldus (1596-1664) formulated a theology of freewill virtually indistinguishable from the Lutheran view.

The Lutheran position, which is also that of mainline Anglican theology,⁷ endeavours to take into account the full range of biblical teaching on the election/freewill issue. On the one hand, Scripture is definitive in its teaching that no one can save himself or herself by any good work, including any act of human will (John 1:12-13, Ephesians 2:8-9). The believer must not therefore attribute his or her salvation to any other source than God Himself, working through His Holy Spirit. On the other hand, unbelief is never presented as the result of God’s decision to damn; damnation is the product of the misuse of the creature’s freewill (Matthew 23:37).

⁶ “Way of Sorrows To Call at New Stations,” *The Times* [London], 6 April 2007.

⁷ I.e., the Anglican mainstream which is neither “low church” (essentially Calvinistic) nor “high church” (essentially Roman Catholic in its theology--without, to be sure, accepting the authority of the Pope).

Efforts have been made to assimilate the Lutheran view to that of Calvinism. Thus James Packer, in his edition of Luther's *De servo arbitrio*, presents Luther as holding that "the cause of salvation and damnation alike is the sovereign will of God."⁸ However, this interpretation of Luther simply does not wash. True, Luther fought tooth and nail against the Roman Catholic and Renaissance humanist position of Erasmus that freewill is the effective cause of salvation; and, so important to Luther was the doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith, that he sometimes expressed that teaching in extreme terms. But if we compare Luther with Calvin, Robert Will is surely correct in seeing "une différence de tempérament très nette (...) entre la liberté [de Luther] (...) et la détermination avec laquelle Calvin, dans l'intransigeance de sa raison française, mit en pratique ses principes de liberté."⁹ As Robert Kolb has emphasised, for Luther, "God is not responsible for evil. No explanation of the existence of evil and its continuation in the lives of believers is possible." We are to recognise how "unsearchable are God's ways" (Romans 11) and be driven "to reliance on the goodness of God and to trust in Jesus Christ."¹⁰ If further evidence of Luther's true position were needed, one could simply go to his Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation of April 1518, where he states in Thesis 14 that "'Freewill' after the fall has the potentiality toward good as an unrealisable capacity only [*subiectiva potentia*]; towards evil, however, always a realisable one [*activa potentia*]."¹¹

The Lutheran position—often referred to as "single predestination," since divine election applies only to the saved—lacks the consistency of the Roman Catholic/Arminian viewpoint (freewill across the board) and that of the Calvinist "double predestination" (divine election across the board, affecting both the saved and the lost). But it has the great merit of taking into account all the biblical data. An interesting illustration in this regard is the passage in the Acts of the Apostles

⁸ J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (eds. and trans.), *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther (London: James Clarke, 1957), p. 55.

⁹ Robert Will, *La liberté chrétienne. Etude sur le principe de la piété chez Luther* (Strasbourg: Istra, 1922), pp. x-xi; cf. Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* ("Lutheran Quarterly Books"; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), especially pp. 32 ff.

¹⁰ Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method* ("Lutheran Quarterly Books"; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹¹ WA [the standard, authoritative Weimarer Ausgabe of Luther's Works], I, 353-54.

(16:30-31) recounting the Apostle Paul’s encounter with his Philippian jailer. The jailer asks, “What must I *do* to be saved?” Paul (who wrote Ephesians, declaring that one is saved solely by God’s grace and not by what one does or wills and that faith itself is God’s gift) replied: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” An act of will is required; but once that act has taken place, it must be attributed to God the Holy Spirit and not to the individual—“lest anyone should boast.”¹²

Further Analysis and a Conclusion

Several questions are worth raising at this point.

- (1) Could one not eliminate the paradox in the Lutheran viewpoint (and vindicate the Roman Catholic/Arminian approach) by observing that in Scripture predestination is made conditional upon divine foreknowledge (Romans 8:29)? The problem here is that the biblical understanding of “foreknowledge” entails the notion of divinely created knowledge—and is thus simply another way of expressing divine sovereignty. God’s foreknowledge “is an election or foreordination of His people (R. 8:29; 11:2) or Christ (1 Pt. 1:20).”¹³ The idea is not that God looks forward in time to see who will believe and who will not and then ratifies what the human creature decides, but rather that divine election/predestination takes place as a result of the action of the divine mind. In short, one cannot solve the paradox by pitting foreknowledge against election.
- (2) Can one not get around the problem by Ockhamist thinking or by Molinist “middle knowledge”? (After all, Luther himself had Ockhamist instructors early in his theological and philosophical education!) Zagzebski points up the great difficulties with both of these approaches. “In my opinion a serious problem with Ockhamist solutions is that even if they can produce an account of temporal asymmetry that has the

¹² See John Warwick Montgomery, “The Holy Spirit and the Defense of the Faith,” 154 *Bibliotheca Sacra* (October-December 1997), 387-95.

¹³ Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (10 vols.; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), I, 715.

consequence that God's past beliefs do not have the necessity of the past, it is unlikely that this can be done in a way that is independently plausible."¹⁴ On Molinism, Zagzebski cites Walls who "argues that since Molina maintained that God chooses to put people in situations in which he knows they will choose damnation, Molinism is as morally abhorrent as the Calvinist doctrine of predestination."¹⁵

- (3) Should not the Lutheran approach be rejected simply on the ground that it embraces a formal contradiction? If one subtracts the saved elect from the totality of the human population, must not the lost be regarded as in that category because they are the non-elect? Or if one subtracts the lost—who misused their freewill—from the sum total of humanity, must not the saved be seen as having arrived there through a different but equally real act of will (they did *not* reject the grace of God)? Luther's answer is simply that since "God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9), one must stick with the Word of God in Holy Scripture no matter what, and must never draw inferences from one passage of Scripture which would contradict the clear teaching of other biblical passages. Putting it another way, Luther places fact (here biblical fact) above formal questions of contradiction. Life, for him, is bigger than logic. This may seem initially irrational, but at the frontiers of science, the same approach operates. Thus, though the properties of particles are not those of waves (and the two are in various respects logically incompatible), where two sets of equally good experiments lead to the conclusion that light is both particulate and undulatory, one works with the "photon" (a "wave-particle") regardless of the logical difficulties present in such a solution. The alternative is clearly unacceptable, for it would involve refusing to recognise one set of sound experiments or the other.¹⁶ Of course, Luther's reasoning is founded on a confidence that

¹⁴ Linda T. Zagzebski, "Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will," in Kane, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57. Jerry Walls, "Is Molinism as Bad as Calvinism?," 7 *Faith and Philosophy* (1990), 85-98.

¹⁶ Cf. Kip S. Thorne, *Black Holes and Time Warps*, Foreword by Stephen Hawking (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), especially p. 147.

the Bible is indeed God's Word and therefore that none of its asseverations can rightly be ignored. Support for that claim would take us well beyond the bounds of this paper.¹⁷

- (4) What can a theological approach—and, specifically, the Lutheran—offer to the general and the legal discussion of the freewill issue? We shall make four suggestions in conclusion. First, freewill is established on a transcendent foundation—on the basis of clear revelatory teaching, and each individual is held responsible morally and legally for his or her acts (Galatians 6:7). Secondly, because the most important possible decision in life, that of entering into a saving relationship with God, does not have its ultimate explanation in man's freewill but rather in God's sovereign love, humans are given every reason not to exercise *hubris* in thinking that they can build towers of Babel so as to climb up to God by their own self-centred efforts. Thirdly, the promise of a Last Judgment means that where judicial error has occurred or for any other reason human beings have escaped the consequences of the misuse of their freewill on earth, they will not escape those consequences in eternity. Finally, though the theological answer does not resolve the paradox of determinism/freewill as it exists in secular thought, it places it in the context of a loving God who sent His only Son to die for an undeserving race and “who will have all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).¹⁸

How much more satisfactory is the biblical gospel than the conclusions to which secular theorising leads in an attempt to resolve the destiny/freewill issue. Consider again Einstein: “Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance

¹⁷ For a full-scale argument to this effect, see John Warwick Montgomery, *Tractatus Logico-Theologicus* (Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2003); also, his *History, Law and Christianity* (Calgary, Alberta: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology and Public Policy, 2002).

¹⁸ This essay is not the place to enter into casuistical areas such as that represented by a recent Roman Catholic work: Simon Francis Gaine, O.P., *‘Will There Be Free Will in Heaven?’ Freedom, Impeccability and Beatitude* (London: T & T Clark, 2003). The answer to that question, by the way, is Yes: owing to a radical character change in the saved individual (2 Corinthians 5:17), he/she in eternity will no longer seek to use freewill negatively so as to reach sinful decisions. Augustine properly described this as the state of *non posse peccari*.

to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible player.”¹⁹ Or playwright Glen Berger (*Underneath the Lintel*): “A magician tells you to choose any card in the deck, (*Increasingly bitter*) and so with free will you do choose...but you don’t realize the magician has already subtly forced you to pick the exact card he wanted you to pick. Magicians call that a ‘Hobson’s Choice.’ And in life we think we make choices...but they’re Hobson’s Choices. So who is this Hobson? Who is this magician gulling us? That’s the question. Simply something named Chance? Or Fate? (*Looking up*) Or Something Else?”²⁰

“Something Else,” indeed. Rather, *Someone* Else. And Someone who says that not a sparrow falls from a tree without the knowledge of our Heavenly Father and that we are of more value than many sparrows. The sovereign decisions of this “magician” are saving acts, and if we insist on employing our genuine freewill to thwart His love and grace, we have only ourselves to blame for the results, both in time and in eternity.

¹⁹ Einstein, *loc. cit.*

²⁰ Glen Berger, *Underneath the Lintel* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2003), pp. 28-29. Currently (April 2007) Richard Schiff is starring in the play at the Duchess Theatre in London’s West End.