

SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

A COMPATIBLE SOLUTION:
ON DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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A COMPATIBLE SOLUTION: ON DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

While walking down a wilderness trail, being *X* came to a place where the road diverged in two directions—one to the left, and one to the right. As *X* rested from his journey, he considered the options available to him. Either, he could take (*a*) the path on the left, (*b*) the path on the right, (*c*) return to the place from which he came, or (*d*) remain at rest. After his rest, *X* chose (*b*). In the previous scenario it is also assumed that God¹ exists, and according to His perfect foreknowledge knew beforehand this very scenario and the decision *X* would make concerning his wilderness journey. Being that God's foreknowledge is infallible in regard to the wilderness scenario and the decision *X* made for (*b*), then *X* could not do anything but fulfill what God previously foreknew to be true; namely, *X*'s choosing of (*b*). Thus, God's foreknowledge of *X* choosing (*b*) made *X*'s choosing of (*b*) not just possible, but rendered it certain. It seems, therefore, that human freedom must be a complete illusion.²

¹ This is the God according to traditional Christianity, and is to be defined as the Scriptures would support Him to be; namely, the One who is wholly omnipotent, exhaustively omniscient, and who is actively involved with His creation and the agents who are contingent upon Him for their existence. He foresees all events, controls all events, and governs those events with wise and moral sovereignty for the aim of His set purposes. See also that God is *necessarily omniscient* in Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991], 87.

² Ibid., 91. See also Nelson Pike, "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings, 2nd ed.* eds. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 130-136. Though his propositions come to this conclusion, Pike clearly states that in the task he folds, he is not arguing "to show that determinism is true" (Ibid., 130).

If God’s foreknowledge makes actions and events certain, which it does, for He is not caught by surprise, and cannot be because of His omniscience, then all actions and events happen according to what He eternally knew to be so. The problem arises when one begins analyzing the freedom of the contingent agents who live and make decisions within the confines of a creation sustained by God. Are they free decisions or not? That is, do the creatures, like being *X*, possess the freedom needed in order for there to be a genuinely responsible action—one they could even be held accountable for? Indeed, these questions are good, but have yet to point to the more specific problem. This specific problem, lies not so much with the ends of things (*X* continued down the path on the right), but more so with the means to those ends (Why is it that *X* chose the path on the right? Was the action forced, or free? Determined, or not?).³ Therefore, the specific problem subsists not so much with God foreknowing all things that will come to pass, but with the reconciliation of such an exhaustive foreknowledge (which causes all actions and events to be certain) and the freedom of His creatures.

Seeking to resolve this problem, philosophers have articulated various arguments, often times hinging upon how their view relates to one conclusion,⁴ namely *determinism*.⁵ A definition of this particular conclusion will be considered briefly here for the purposes

³ Roy C. Weatherford, “Logical Determinism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 194.

⁴ This clause is a sweeping statement—that views “hinge” on “one conclusion”—and does not take into consideration all of the philosophers who have been involved in the freedom and foreknowledge debate. However, for this essay I mean for it to be taken in a more limited sense, narrowing the field to advocates of either libertarian or compatibilist freedom.

⁵ It is important to note that when determinism is used in this essay, it does *not* imply nor should it be associated with some sort of fatalism—i.e. something which claims that present actions of agents have no affect on the future. Fatalism states, whatever is, just is. It does not honor the reality of whatever God ordains, *is*. I reject fatalism because it rejects God’s providence.

below. Determinism is the theory which basically states that all actions and events are contingent upon the state of affairs, with “some causal laws,” which *sufficiently cause* those actions to come to pass.⁶ For example, being *X* was determined to choose (*b*) because (*a*) was blocked by a fallen tree, (*c*) meant traveling in the opposite direction he intended, and (*d*) might have lead to starvation and death; and all the states of affairs were determined *so that X* would choose (*b*). In regards to this conclusion, some have simply deduced that human freedom must therefore be nullified. Though this conclusion seems logically sound, such a definite statement about human freedom is not necessary—especially with regard to what Scriptures reveal (see APPENDIX).

Given this definition of determinism, philosophers divide into two camps when reconciling divine foreknowledge and human freedom, namely those who hold to a *libertarian* freedom and those who hold to a *compatibilist* freedom.⁷ Those who hold to the latter believe that a person’s act is free even though it is causally determined. Thus, human freedom is deemed “compatible” with causal determination. Those who hold to the former believe that a person’s act cannot be free if it is causally determined, and is thus “*incompatible*” with determinism.⁸ This libertarianism will be addressed first, rejected, and then followed by a brief defense of the former.

Libertarian freedom basically states that no other explanation can be given for one’s action other than what one decides to perform. Or, in other words, possessing

⁶ Ibid., 196; John Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 21n7.

⁷ I am aware that other views of freedom as well as other views of God’s knowledge have been proposed, but for the limits of this essay, we will only observe these two.

⁸ Roy C. Weatherford, “Compatibilism and Incompatibilism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.

libertarian freedom when making a decision means that a person has the power to always choose differently than what he did.⁹ For example, if *X* possessed libertarian freedom, he could have always done other than (*b*); that is, he could have always chose (*a*), or (*c*), or (*d*). Thus, unlike determinism, libertarianism argues that the state of affairs surrounding a particular action or event do *not* sufficiently cause an action or event to occur.¹⁰ Hence, *X* might have been affected to some degree by the surrounding circumstances of (*a*), (*c*), and (*d*), as he was, but even all of them together would not have *sufficiently* inclined *X* to decide one way or the other. This means that all actions must, at some point, be contingent *only* on the one making the decision, and not also on what God foreknew to be so and caused to be certain. Ultimately, the libertarian conclusion is this: If libertarian freedom is true, and a creature has the power to always do other than what he does, then actions and events are not also causally determined by God; instead, they are determined at the time the decision was made. Thus, God’s knowledge of an event is only real once the action has been made.¹¹ This, however, distorts God’s sovereign control over all actions and events, because if the action of a person is not inclined by “outside determination,”¹² then God would be made out to be a liar if someone has the power to choose other than what His infallible foreknowledge saw to be so. Thus, His

⁹ Basinger displays libertarian freedom by explaining that a person is free when performing an action only if he has the power “to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will actually occur has not yet been determined” (David Basinger, *Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought*, Religious Studies, vol. 22 [Sept. /Dec. 1986], 416).

¹⁰ Ledger Wood, “Indeterminism,” in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1942), 143.

¹¹ Though I am not addressing the issue in this paper, it is worthy to note that some have attempted to hold libertarian freedom together with God’s *middle knowledge*. See William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987); or Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 169-80.

¹² R. K. McGregor Wright, in John Frame, *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 138.

foreknowledge would not make things certain, but only possible. Libertarian freedom makes God out to be a wise reactor to events,¹³ and not a sovereign controller of the events.

An option which keeps us from slipping in to such error is compatibilism, or what some have deemed “soft” determinism. Again, compatibilism states that a person’s act is both causally determined and free. Therefore, contra libertarian freedom, the will *is* sufficiently inclined to make a particular decision in one way rather than the other. For example, it was causally determined that *X* would choose (*b*), *and* would do so freely. In coming to such conclusions, compatibilists see the need to define what they mean by a “free act,” and do so by asserting three characteristics of a free act. As Hasker explains,

- (1) The action is not caused by compulsion or by states of affairs external to the agent.¹⁴
- (2) Instead the *immediate cause* of the action is a psychological state of affairs internal to the agent—wish, desire, intention or something of the sort.
- (3) The situation is one in which it was *in the agents power* to have acted differently, *if he had wanted to*.¹⁵

If these are true for a particular action, then a compatibilist would say the action is free.

And if these characteristics of a free action hold to be so even for an action which is causally determined, then human freedom and causal determination is compatible. For

¹³ Pinnock, an advocate of libertarian freedom, even states, “If plan A fails, God is ready with plan B” (Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, by Clark Pinnock, et al. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994], 113-114). Sanders, another advocate of libertarian freedom, goes so far as to say that “God takes risks” and that even the history of God’s activity is dependent on human response (John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998], 10, 46-49).

¹⁴ E.g. someone forcing another into a swimming pool by a shove or a push. This push would be considered that which *compelled* the person to act in a way that he fell into the pool. Falling into the pool is not considered a free act.

¹⁵ William Hasker, *Metaphysics: Constructing a World View*, ed. C. Stephen Evans, *Contours of Christian Philosophy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 34. Though Hasker does *not* hold to compatibilism, he does provide a good analysis of the compatibilist’s view of a free act.

instance, using the example provided above, it is true that 1) *X* was not forced by any of the circumstances external to him, and 2) he chose (*b*) due to his desire not to do (*a*), (*c*), or (*d*), and 3) the scenario was one whereby *X* had the power to have acted differently if he had wanted to. Thus, though *X*'s action was deemed certain by God's infallible foreknowledge of the scenario, as demonstrated above, his action can still be called free. If this is so, then there must be a way God acts according to His foreknowledge so as to ordain not just the ends of all actions and events but also the means to those ends.¹⁶ Thus, He not only ordains that *X* chose (*b*), but also that (*b*) would be that which *X* would most desire to do. Compatibilism, therefore, holds that God is not just a wise reactor, but a wise planner and sovereign controller of all actions and events.

Against this conclusion, libertarians have brought two possible objections against compatibilism: (*A*) causal determination eliminates human responsibility; and (*B*) the view questions the moral character of God with regard to sin. (*A*) has already been answered by the implications above, but for clarity, it will briefly be considered. It is right to say that a person is responsible *only* if his action is free. Compatibilism argues that the actions of a person, though causally determined, are still done freely, because an agent acts according to their *own* personal desires. Therefore, the compatibilists response to (*A*) is clear; that is, since the act is free, agents are held responsible for their actions. (*B*) is more complex; however, it can be answered. The compatibilist response is that God's foreknowing of an agent sinning and thus deeming it to be certain does not cause God to become anything less in moral character. An agent's desire to sin does no harm to God's moral character, because the sin is the agent's, not God's. In agreement with

¹⁶ Feinberg, in *Predestination*, 26; Weatherford, "Logical Determinism," 194.

Jonathan Edwards, the fact that God ordains sin to be (i.e. He grants it permission to exist or happen) is not the same thing as God actually *sinning*, that is, doing sin by His own “positive agency.”¹⁷ Edwards explains this *positive agency* by giving an analogy of how one can explain the sun as both the cause of light and heat and that which gives occasion to darkness and cold. He explains that although it gives occasion for darkness and cold by its hiding of itself behind the horizon, this does not mean that it has become the positive agent (i.e. the cause or producer) of them.¹⁸ On a much greater scale, God is able to govern all actions and events, including the sin of agents, and still remain free from being the actual producer of sin. Therefore, God remains wholly sovereign of all actions and events He foreknew to come to pass and still remains altogether good and holy. Nothing of His rendering of actions and events certain lessens His moral character.

In conclusion, libertarian freedom, as defined above, does great harm when explaining God’s foreknowledge and sovereign control over all things. Compatibilist freedom, however, acknowledges God’s foreknowledge of all actions and events and bows to the fact that they are indeed rendered certain, while agents maintain freedom.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards, “Freedom of the Will,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004), 76-77.

¹⁸ Ibid.

APPENDIX

A BIBLICAL GLANCE AT DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

From all that we have observed above, it is clear that since God's foreknowledge is infallible, he does not just render events possible, but renders them certain, so that all that He has wisely ordained to come to pass will do so accordingly. This means that causal determination is true, *yet* it is not to be viewed in such a manner that it nullifies human freedom.¹⁹ God ordains not only the ends, but also the means to the ends of all actions and events, so that His set purposes might be accomplished—a conclusion which is clearly observed in many texts of the Scriptures.

For instance, God predestined those whom He adopts as children, and also ordains that they come to faith in Christ through hearing the gospel and *believing* in its truth (Eph 1:5, 11, 13; cf. Ac 13:48). According to His foreknowledge, He also predetermined that Christ would die on a cross, and would do so *at the hands of godless men* like Judas,

¹⁹ Based on the scriptures, D. A. Carson draws great attention to both divine sovereignty and human freedom so as not to deny one or the other. He states it as so:

(1) God is absolutely sovereign, but His sovereignty never functions in such a way that human responsibility is curtailed, minimized, or mitigated.

(2) Human beings are morally responsible creatures—they significantly choose, rebel, obey, believe, defy, make decisions, and so forth, and they are rightly held accountable for such actions; but this characteristic never functions so as to make God absolutely contingent.

D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 201.

Herod, Pontius Pilot, the Gentiles, and people of Israel (Ac 2:23; 4:27). God ordained the crucifixion, and did so by ordaining the very free acts that would lead to it (Ac 4:28; cf. Is 53:10)—affirmed even more by His holding them accountable for their actions even though it was ordained that Christ would die (Mt 26:24=Lk 22:22). Consider also the eschaton. God has ordained that there will be no more sin in the age to come. That is, nobody will even have an inclination to sin. Hodge rightly notes that the redeemed will “persevere in holiness forever in heaven, yet do not cease to be free agents.”²⁰ The *only* explanation given for such a freedom not to sin is *God* Himself (cf. Is 66:22; Rom 8:21; Heb 4:15; 12:23; 2Pe 3:13; 1Jn 3:2; Rev 21:1, 4, 27; 22:3).²¹

It is clear, therefore, that the Scriptures teach that God is wholly sovereign²² over all things, and that man is accountable for his free actions; and never is there mentioned any tension between the two. One must not teach that because divine foreknowledge and human freedom seem to be *incompatible*, it is right to reject one or the other. This type of reasoning does not bow the knee to the word of God. Instead, it seeks to explain what may be hard to accept in a way that is more palatable to man, thus misrepresenting, rather than trusting what is clearly taught in the Scriptures; namely, God knows and man is responsible.

²⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 546.

²¹ For the purposes of this essay, the highlights above are enough to draw the conclusions necessary. For further study of what the scriptures teach concerning God’s foreknowledge and the compatibility of human freedom and causal determination, see Gen 37:12-28; 45:4-8; 50:20; Josh 24:15-24; 1Sa 23:10-12; Ezra 1:1; 6:22; Ps 33:13-15; 115:3; 147:5; Prov 16:4-5; 21:1; Lam 3:37-38; Dan 4:34-5; Mt 23:37; Jn 1:12-3; 3:16; 6:37,40; 21:17; Ac 3:17-19; Rom 8:29-30; 9:19-21; 11:36; Heb 4:12-3; 1Pe 1:20; 1Jn 3:20; Rev 13:8; 17:8.

²² I use the phrase *God’s sovereignty* to collectively include both His foreknowledge and sovereign control. Cf. Is 42:9; 44:7; 45:11; 46:9,10; 48:3,5,6; Jer 1:5; Dan 2:28,29; Mt 6:8; 24:36; Ac 15:18; Rom 8:29; 11:2; 1Pet 1:2.

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