

The Consistency of Divine Sovereignty and Human Accountability

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In the last article, we saw how it can be that God from all eternity ordained "whatsoever comes to pass" and yet is not "the author of sin" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.1). Having shown this, the issue that we will focus on in this article is how God's control over all things does not destroy human accountability. As the Westminster confession of faith goes on to say, God's sovereignty does not do violence "to the will of the creatures."

Many things that we saw in the last article shed light on this issue of human accountability under the providence of God. For example, the fact that sin is not a result of God injecting evil into someone's heart, but more a matter of Him withholding the grace that would have prevented the person from sinning, is one thing that preserves our moral accountability and makes clear that God is not the author of sin. We will now look more closely at how God determines the will, which will primarily show why His sovereignty does not destroy our moral accountability, and secondarily give further vindication of the fact that God is not the author of sin.

To be specific, this analysis will answer two questions for us. First, how can we be held responsible for our sinful actions when they are all predetermined by God? Second, how can our good choices be genuine when they have all been predetermined and brought about by God?

The teaching of the Scriptures

The first thing that I wish to point out is that the Scriptures see divine sovereignty as consistent with moral accountability. They teach both that we are accountable for our actions and that God ultimately determines our choices. As we will see in a little bit, this gives us a principle that is essential for solving the mystery.

In Exodus 7:2-4 God says to Moses:

You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall *speak to Pharaoh that he let the sons of Israel go out of his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs*

and My wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh will not listen to you, then I will lay My hand on Egypt, and bring out My hosts, My people the sons of Israel, from the land of Egypt by great judgments.

This is an amazing passage! In verse 2, God says that Moses and Aaron are, in God's authority, to command Pharaoh to let Israel go. But in verse 3, God says that He will harden Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh will not let Israel go. In verse 4, we read that God is going to judge Pharaoh and Egypt for this disobedience. Thus, the Scriptures do not see God's sovereignty over Pharaoh in hardening his heart as destroying Pharaoh's moral accountability, for God judges Pharaoh for his disobedience. We know that Pharaoh deserves this judgment because all of God's judgments and ways are just: "all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He" (Deuteronomy 32:4). In fact, later on in the story, Pharaoh himself acknowledges his guilt: "I have sinned this time; the Lord is the righteous one, and I and my people are the wicked ones" (Exodus 9:27).

Likewise, in the book of Acts we read that the sinful acts of the Jews, Gentiles, Herod and Pontius Pilate that resulted in Christ's crucifixion, had all been predestined by God (Acts 4:28). Yet, they are considered to be morally guilty for these sins (Acts 2:23; 7:52). Jesus seems to affirm in the same sentence the sovereignty of God over His betrayal and the moral guilt of the one who betrayed Him: "For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" (Luke 22:22). In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 we read of a time when, to those who reject the Gospel, "God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness." Many more instances could be given, but this is sufficient to show that the Scriptures believe that God's sovereignty is consistent with the fact that He holds us all accountable for our sins.

The Scriptures also believe that our good choices are genuine, even though they are brought about by God. In 2 Corinthians 8:16, Paul says that Titus's love and earnestness for the Corinthians was put in his heart by God. Yet, Paul considers Titus' earnestness as being genuine, saying "he has gone to you of his own accord" (v. 17). Ezekiel 33:27 teaches that the obedience of Christians is caused by the Spirit of God: "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes..." Yet, who would dare say that our obedience is not genuine! Likewise, faith is said to be given to us from God (Philippians 1:29), yet our faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:6).

The Scriptures seem to outright deny the common belief that humans ultimately determine their own choices ("free-will"). Jeremiah 10:23 says, "I know, O Lord, that a man's way is not in himself; nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps."

From all of this, we must conclude that according to Scripture, God's control does not destroy moral accountability in regards to our sinful choices, and neither does it destroy the genuineness of the good choices Christians make. Since the Scriptures teach this, we should believe it even if we can't understand how it fits together logically. In other words, we should believe that God's sovereignty is consistent with our moral agency simply because *God says that it is, and God always speaks the truth.*

There are some who stop after this point, saying that it is a mystery to understand how these things are consistent. That is perfectly fine. It seems to me, however, that simple reflection reveals that the Scriptures resolve much of the mystery. How so? It seems to me in this way: the fact that the Scriptures teach that we are justly held accountable for what God ultimately causes us to do teaches us that *free-will is not a prerequisite for moral accountability.* In other words, you don't need to have the power of ultimate self-determination ("free-will") in order to be held accountable for your choices.

You see, the reason that we might think that the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is a mystery is because of a certain presupposition we have: that moral accountability requires that we have ultimate self-determination—that we have the final say over what we will do. But since the Scriptures show that God ultimately determines what we will do and yet we are still accountable for our actions, we must conclude that the common belief that moral accountability requires human free-will is false. Therefore, moral accountability is established by something other than freedom from divine determination.

What about all of the "choice" verses?

Before looking at what it is that makes us accountable for our choices, there is one thing that is important to understand at this point. Very often, people try to refute the sovereignty of God by pointing to the many passages where humans are told to make choices. The argument goes like this: "Look at all of these verses that tell us to make choices. For example, John 3:36 says that whoever believes in Christ will have eternal life. This means that God has given us the power to ultimately decide what we will do. He doesn't control everything because He has left many things up to us.

But this argument reads too much into those texts. Those who believe in God's control over all things acknowledge that we make choices. I repeat: *humans make choices.* That is not the issue which is up for debate. The issue is this: *Why* do we make the choices that we do? *How* do we come to make our choices? Is God perhaps the one who ultimately causes us to choose what we do? The many passages in the Bible where we are told to choose certain things do not

address this issue. For they do not say how it is that we come to make the choices that we do. All that they say is that we make choices. With this, predestination agrees. But the texts do not say that we have ultimate self-determination. They don't deal with the issue of whether or not God is ultimately behind our choices. For that issue, we must turn to other Scriptures, which we have seen to clearly teach God's control over all things. Thus, we must conclude that humans do make real, genuine choices. But God is ultimately the one who determines what we will choose.

With this understood, we will now examine the view called *compatibilism*, which endeavors to explain how divine sovereignty is consistent with human responsibility. Perhaps the best defense of this view, which influenced this article to a large extent, is the work by Jonathan Edwards called *On the Freedom of the Will*.

After giving evidence for compatibilism and showing how it is consistent with common sense (and, as we saw above, that it is assumed by the Scriptures), we will then see how the opposing view of freedom, called *Arminianism* (which believes that humans have the power of ultimate self-determination), is contradictory and impossible.

Everything that happens has a cause

A cause is the thing that makes something the way that it is. X is the cause of Y if X is the reason that Y happened. Further, causes are necessarily connected to their effects. In other words, if X makes it certain that Y will occur, X is said to be the cause of Y. If the occurrence of X does not make certain the occurrence of Y, we do not say that X *caused* Y. Rather, we would merely say that X made Y possible.¹

¹ Jonathan Edwards, considered by many to be the greatest theologian America has ever seen, said something very important about how it is inconsistent to say that X caused Y if X did not make it certain that Y would occur. In other words, if upon the occurrence of X, event Y may or *may not* happen, then it would be improper to say that X was the cause of Y. "For an event to have a cause and ground of its existence, and yet not to be connected with its cause, is an inconsistency. For if the event be not connected with the cause, it is not dependent on the cause; its existence is as it were loose from its influence, and may attend it, or may not; it being a mere contingency, whether it follows or attends the influence of the cause, or not: and that is the same thing as not to be dependent on it. And to say, the event is not dependant on its cause, is absurd; it is the same as to say, it is not its cause, nor the event the effect of it; for dependence on the influence of a cause is the very notion of an effect....If we say, the connexion and dependence is not total, but partial, and that the effect, though it has some connexion and dependence, yet is not entirely dependent on

We all know that everything that happens has a cause. We live life based upon this assumption, and without it could not make sense of the world. If your car won't start, you try to find out why. If you get extremely sick, you go to the doctor to find out what is causing your illness. And nobody expects a raging tiger to come into existence in the middle of the room for no reason at all. It is utterly opposed to common sense to think that something can come to be without any reason behind it at all.

Another good argument is that "If a happening has no cause, then it could have been different in the way it happened, even if everything just prior to it were exactly the same. Since observation shows that whenever there are differences in the way things usually happen, there are also differences in the prior conditions, we can conclude, that all happenings have causes."²

All of our choices have a cause—that is, they are made for a reason

If everything has a cause, then it is clear that our choices must have causes as well. They do not happen without reason. This is, in fact, the assumption that we all have. Often times we say to one another, "Why did you do that?" This is the same as saying, "What is the reason behind your choice? What caused you to act in that way?" The person will often respond, "I did that because of x, y, and z."³

To say that our choices have a cause is simply to say that we make all of our decisions with a definite *end* in view. That is, we act with a *purpose*. This purpose that we have in view functions as the *reason* that we make the choice that we do. Thus, the reasons we have for acting serve as the cause of our choices because they move us to act and explain why we acted the way that we did. And we know that all of our choices must be made for a reason because otherwise we would be acting without a cause, and we have already seen that it is impossible for anything to happen without a cause.

it; that is the same thing as to say, that not all that is in the event is an effect of that cause, but that only part of it arises from thence, and part some other way" (*Freedom of the Will*, p. 24). For those interested in being as precise as can be, the technical name for what Edwards is speaking of is *efficient cause*. When I proceed to argue in the article that every event has a cause, I am speaking of efficient causes. I argue that everything which happens has an efficient cause, and nothing can happen without an efficient cause.

² Clifford Williams, *Free-will and determinism: A Dialogue*, (Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), p. 59.

³ Sometimes one may say, "I don't know." But that doesn't mean there was no cause, just that he was unaware of the cause.

All of our choices are made according to the reasons that we think are best

But aren't there often times many reasons in favor of various choices? For example, what about when you are torn between doing homework and getting together with friends? How then do we decide? The answer is that in every choice *we always choose the thing that is most appealing to us*. In other words, our choices are not only made for a reason, they are made according to the reason that we think is best. Now, this doesn't mean that we always choose what is most logical. Our emotions as well as our logic enters into our decisions. Thus, it is perhaps better to word it this way: we always choose the option that we have the greatest preference for. Two other ways to express this are that we choose according to our greatest desire, or that we always choose what we think is best. But it seems that the clearest way to express this truth is by saying "greatest preference" because this seems to most clearly convey the fact that there is a combination of logical and emotional factors in the reasons for our choices.⁴

I will give three reasons supporting the fact that we always choose what we most prefer. First, it is self-evident, for to deny it is to run into absurdities. The alternatives would be "we often choose what we think is worst," or "we often choose what we don't want." Second, if we could choose contrary to our greatest preference, then that would mean that a weaker influence could overpower the stronger influence—which is a contradiction.⁵

Third, choosing contrary to your greatest preference would be equal to choosing

⁴ It is important to understand that this does not mean that we always choose what really is most preferable. Rather, we choose what *appears* most preferable to us. But our perspective may be wrong. Thus, the thing that we have the greatest preference for may not necessarily be the option that really is best. I may prefer the chocolate cake, but when I bite into it discover that it would have been better to have the white cake.

⁵ I hope that nobody will think that I am ignoring an obvious objection to the fact that the weaker cannot overpower the stronger. I am aware that sometimes weaker things do overcome more powerful things. For example, weaker armies have sometimes beaten stronger armies in wars. But examples like that do not disprove the fact that the weaker cannot overpower the stronger. For the reason the weaker army won is because the stronger army was prevented from exerting all of its strength such that the weaker army was exerting more strength than the stronger. The army that was objectively stronger lost because it exerted less power than the other army. If the stronger army had exerted all of its power, then it would have won. Perhaps the best example which proves the truth the greater always overcomes the lesser is that when you put 100 pounds on one side of the balance and 50 pounds on the other side of the balance, the 100 pounds will always make its side drop because it is stronger.

without reason (which we have seen to be impossible). Why is this? Because then there is no explanation why the person came to choose what they did. Let me phrase the dilemma this way: If you could choose contrary to your greatest preference, you would either have a reason for acting this way, or you wouldn't. If there is a reason for your acting this way, then this means that you are actually making the choice because it was more reasonable than the other one. But this is the same as saying that you choose according to your greatest preference—your greatest preference being the thing that was most reasonable. But if there were no reasons for this choice that was contrary to your greatest preference, then the choice was essentially made without cause because no reason could be given for why you chose one thing over another. In this situation, you would be inclined to a certain choice, and yet for no reason at all choose something else. As we saw earlier, it is impossible to make a choice without a cause.

But what about, for example, when someone chooses to study for a test when they really would have found greater enjoyment in going to a movie? In that case, the person desired the long-range benefits of the good grade that studying would bring more than the short-term enjoyment a good movie would have brought. In and of itself, the movie would have been most enjoyable. But all things considered, studying was more preferable.

How our choices are determined

Since we always choose the option that we find most preferable, then it is clear that our choices are determined—they are determined by our greatest preference. But since this is a determination to choose the option that we want the most, it in no way destroys our moral agency.

Having understood this, it is not hard to see how God can control all things without violating our moral agency. He simply arranges the situation so that the option which we find most appealing is the choice that He has ordained for us to make. In other words, if God wants us to choose option A instead of option B, He works things out so that option A is the one that we find most preferable. Thus, God is in sovereign control, yet we are choosing what we want most and are therefore making real, genuine choices.

But some people object at this point: "Wait a minute. Since we don't ultimately determine our preferences, how can we be held accountable for the choices that necessarily flow from them?"

This is a good question because it allows us to clarify an important point: It doesn't matter that we don't ultimately determine our preferences. All that matters is that we are choosing the things that we want the most. In other words, *moral accountability does not depend upon **whether** our choices are determined (caused), but on **how** our choices are determined.* That is a very important point,

so let me repeat in slightly different words: ultimate self-determination is not necessary for us to be justly accountable for our bad choices and it is not necessary to make our good choices genuine. What these things arise from is that we are choosing the things that we want.

This fact is what we saw in the Scriptures above. For according to the Scriptures, God is the ultimate cause of all of our choices, and yet He holds us accountable for our choices. Thus, determinism does not destroy moral accountability. One does not need the power of ultimate self-determination in order to be morally accountable for his actions. Rather, the Scriptures seem to teach compatibilism, which argues that our choices are genuine simply because we are doing what is agreeable to us.

Not only is compatibilism assumed and taught in the Scriptures, it is also consistent with common sense. Our own common sense shows that as long as we are choosing according to our greatest preferences, our moral agency is not destroyed to any degree. Who could ever honestly say, "My choice to give money to the poor wasn't genuine because I was doing the option that I had the greatest preference for?" Would a judge really excuse the criminal who said, "You can't hold me accountable for my crime because I wanted to do it! In fact, I wanted to do it so much that I could not have done otherwise?" Of course not! The criminal would actually be compounding his guilt by the fact that he wanted to do it so much, not excusing it!

Therefore, it is in perfect agreement with common sense that, even though all of our choices have been predetermined, they are genuine and we can be held responsible for them because they are the choices that we considered most reasonable to make. It is important to recognize, however, that God does not cause a sinful choice to be reasonable in the same way that He causes a good choice to be reasonable. God causes good by means of positive causation, but is behind evil by means of negative causation. What is the difference?

The sun causes day on the earth by producing light. This is what I mean by positive cause. God causes good by producing goodness in one's heart, and thus is its positive cause. But just as the darkness of the night is not something that is produced by the sun's rays—but rather is caused by their absence—so also God directs the evil desires in people's hearts by means of *withholding* His restraining grace to the extent that they desire to do the thing that He has ordained. We must strongly affirm that God "does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13) because He does not produce the sinful desires in people's hearts, but determines and controls them by means of circumstances and the degree to which He withholds His grace upon their hearts. Further, humans are all born sinful. So the negative causation God exercises is simply making us act according to our own natures. Thus, God cannot be blamed for sin because He controls evil by means of negative causation—He directs it by the absence of goodness rather, not by producing evil.

John Piper gives good insight into the way God brings about preferences (motives) to cause people to act:

always keep in mind that everything God does toward men—His commanding, His calling, His warning, His promising, His weeping over Jerusalem—everything is His means of creating situations which function as motives to illicit the acts of will which He has ordained to come to pass. In this way He ultimately determines all acts of volition (though not all in the same way) and yet holds man accountable only for those acts which they want most to do.⁶

To sum up, moral accountability does not depend upon *whether* our choices are determined, it depends upon *how* they are determined. As long as our choices are caused by our desires and reasonable motives, they are responsible acts. And since God controls our choices by controlling our preferences, His sovereignty does not violate our moral agency. Further, while God is the ultimate cause of all things, He is behind good and evil in different ways. God regulates circumstances and the degree of His grace to bring about the preferences which will illicit the choices that He has ordained. The fallacy of Arminianism is in thinking that one cannot be held responsible for something unless it is an entirely free and undetermined act.

Some objections considered

Do we choose our preferences? Perhaps an Arminian will admit that we choose according to our greatest preference, but then object that those preferences are themselves a result of our choice. This objection, however, is illogical. Preferences must ultimately be given and not chosen. Why? Because if we could choose our own preferences, we would then have to ask "How did we come to choose those particular preferences and not others?" If it was by an act of choice, this only backs it up a step further: Wouldn't that choice itself have to be based upon preferences as well? And then wouldn't those preferences also have had to have been chosen? And wouldn't they have to have been chosen based upon other preferences? As you can see, this would result in us going back forever, without ever encountering a first cause.

On the other hand, if we do not obtain our desires by an act of choice, then either those preferences had no cause (which we have already seen to be impossible), or else they are ultimately a result of God's predestining plan—which brings us right back to the Calvinist view.

⁶ John Piper, "A Response to J.I. Packer on the So-Called Antinomy Between The sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility," unpublished article, March 1976, p. 3.

Therefore, it is important to understand that we do not *make* something preferable to us. We do not choose our preferences. Rather, they are ultimately brought about by God by means of circumstances, our character, and other things. For example, I studied for a test a few weeks ago because it was more reasonable to me than not studying. Now, I did not *make* studying the most reasonable thing. Rather, I considered the situation and *recognized* that studying was the most appealing thing to my mind. As a result, I chose to study. Clearly, this was a genuine choice. Yet, it was also *causally determined* (and thus could not have been otherwise) because I necessarily chose the option that I found most reasonable. So both determinism and moral responsibility are therefore compatible.

What role do our character and circumstances have in our choices? As we saw earlier in the John Piper quote, the answer seems to be that God uses them to bring about our preferences. Thus, on a secondary level our preferences are a result of our character and present circumstances. In other words, the kind of things that we find preferable depends upon the kind of person that we are. Because our preferences are in accordance with who we are, they are genuinely our preferences.

Do we choose our characters? If one objects that we choose our character (and thus ultimately our desires), I respond that while we can and do affect our character by our choices, it is hopelessly contradictory to think of our wills as the ultimate cause of our character. Our character is not something that exists independent from us, it *is* us. Therefore, in order to choose our own characters we would need to exist before we actually exist!

This brings us to another important truth. By creating you, God determined your character. Since our character to a large extent determines the preferences we have, God to a large extent determined the things we would choose because He ultimately designed our character. Someone may say that God brings us into existence but in doing so He does not determine our characters. But how can God bring X into existence without thereby defining the nature of X, which will be determinative of how it will function and behave? If God has not defined its controlling nature, in what sense is it X that God has brought into existence (rather than not-X)?⁷

⁷ J.A. Crabtree, "Does Middle Knowledge Solve the Problem of Divine Sovereignty?" in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware, p. 444. The fact that all people are born sinners because of Adam's sin is an important truth to keep in mind so that we have a proper view of why we are all born sinful when God determines our characters. God cannot be blamed for our sinful natures because He originally created humans entirely good and without sin. By our own accord we fell in Adam. While this was according to God's plan, it was

The possibility that God often directs our desires by directing our character should also help us to further see the consistency between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. As we saw earlier, your character is not something that exists separate from you. It is not a grid that is forced upon your behavior. Rather, it is *you*. Obviously, you cannot be free from yourself. Your preferences (and thus choices) are truly yours and are genuine because they are in accordance with who you are. God's sovereignty does not in the least change that, but rather seems to work by means of it and thus preserves moral accountability. The only way to escape the sovereignty of God would be to escape being a creature. God the creator is always sovereign over what He creates because, in creating, He determines the design and mode of its working.

Arminian freedom is impossible

Having seen that compatibilism succeeds in showing the consistency of divine sovereignty and human accountability, we will now show the unreasonableness of the opposing view of Arminianism. In fact, I hope to show that the Arminian form of freedom is not only impossible, but would actually destroy moral accountability. There are three main claims of Arminian freedom which we will briefly examine:

1. We have an ultimate *self-determining power* wherein we determine our own choices.
2. Previous to the act of choice our mind is in a state of *indifference*—that is, there is nothing necessarily biasing the mind in either direction.
3. Our choices are *contingent*—they are not the necessary results of previous casual connections. In other words, for any given situation, we could have chosen otherwise. This is the logical outcome of #2, that our choices are made from a state of

nevertheless our fault. The fact that all people are born sinners is a result of our sin in Adam--God is simply letting the human race continue according to the ruin that we brought upon ourselves. There is great hope, however, in that God is active to change lives through Jesus Christ. He does not leave everybody to let them continue in their sin. He commands all to repent, and through the power of His Spirit and word, He changes the hearts of His chosen people and brings them to faith in Christ. In Christ we are saved from the penalty of our sins, and God progressively works in our lives to make us more and more holy. Humans by nature are on a downward spiral because of their sins. But by His grace, God has put Christians on an upward climb to less and less sin and greater holiness. At death the Christian is totally purified from sin. One day God will condemn all unbelievers and renew the heavens and earth for His elect to live in forever, making it so that sin never again enters creation.

indifference.⁸

The power of ultimate self-determination is impossible

In regards to the first supposition, is it possible for the human will to be self-determined? I don't think so. We saw earlier that all of our choices have a cause. Some Arminians might argue that our choices do have a cause—they are caused by the agent. But, they will say, there is nothing which causes the agent to act. Thus, his choices are fully *self-determined*. Without being caused by anything else, the agent causes his own choices. The things that we have seen above in arguing for compatibilism are sufficient to refute the Arminian belief of self-determination.

First, they are only pushing the problem back one step. Sure, the choice had a cause. But they are saying that the agent who made the choice was not caused to make it. As we saw earlier, this is impossible because everything that happens must have a cause.

Second, isn't this act of the agent to cause his own choice *itself a choice*—the choice to make a choice? If so, this means that He is making a choice before He makes His choice! Third, the Arminian view contradicts all of the evidence we have seen which shows that our choices are not self-determined, but are determined by our preferences. Fourth, if it is claimed that the agent causes his own choice by determining his own preferences, the inconsistency of that belief has also been shown above.

In other words, the essential objection to the belief that we possess ultimate self-determination is similar to the objection we earlier gave to the idea that we choose our own desires. On the Arminian view, we must ask the question: *Why* did the agent choose to make the choice that he did? Was that a result of his choice as well? If not, then the act was not self-determined and thus is not consistent with moral agency on the Arminian's view. If it was a result of choice, then this only backs the problem up a step. For, why did he choose to make the choice that he did? Was *that choice* also a result of previous choice? As should be clear by now, this problem keeps going back and back forever. There can be no end to it, but instead it results in the absurdity of an infinite regress—a chain of causes that has no beginning.

Often times one holding the Arminian view will try to evade this reasoning by saying that the agent "just chooses." But this is begging the question, for it is simply repeating the difficulty and therefore leaves the whole objection unaddressed. The issue is not *whether* the agent chooses, but *how* does the agent come to choose? Further, the statement that the agent "just chooses" is

⁸ This organization is taken from Edward's *Freedom of the Will*, p. 12.

equivalent to saying that he acts without a cause. But, as we saw earlier, it is impossible for anything to happen without a cause.

Choosing from a state of indifference is impossible

The next supposition of Arminian freedom is that in any decision, the will is neutral enough to go either way. Therefore, for any decision made, we could have chosen otherwise (which is then the third supposition of Arminian freedom). Because the second and third suppositions are so closely related, refuting one will necessarily refute the other. First, we will now see that it is impossible for the mind to choose out of a state of indifference.

While the Arminian view does acknowledge that reasons surround our acts of will, they deny that these reasons are ever strong enough to "incline the will *decisively* in one way or another. Instead, the will, despite its inclination, is neutral enough so that it can and sometimes does choose contrary to the direction the causes incline it."⁹

The first problem with this is that it contradicts the truth that we make our choices with a definite *end* in view. That is, we act with a *purpose*. But if you have a purpose for your action, you are not choosing from a state of indifference.

Second, being indifferent to your choice is not regarded by common sense to be a good thing—it is bad for someone (in moral situations) not to care (that is, to be indifferent about) what they are going to choose.

Third, if the will has no decisive preference that determines it to select option A instead of option B, then the person simply could not act. It is the proverbial situation of the donkey stuck between two bails of hay that he has an equal desire for, and so he ends up starving to death because he was unable to make a choice. The very choice of option A instead of option B is the act of *stating your preference for A instead of B*. But if your choice is from a state of neutrality, there is no preference to state and thus no choice can be made.

Fourth, for a person to act from a state of indifference would be the same as the person acting without a cause. Why? Because there is nothing that is necessarily bringing about the choice. Instead, it can go either way. But a *cause*, by definition, is something that necessarily brings about an effect. If there is nothing that necessarily results in you choosing a particular choice, then there is, by definition, no cause to that choice. This makes indifference impossible because, as we saw earlier, nothing can happen without a cause.

⁹ John Feinberg, "God, Freedom, and Evil in Calvinist Thinking," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, p. 469.

It is Arminianism, not compatibilism that destroys moral accountability. At this point we are able to see that Arminian freedom destroys moral accountability. Why? Because if our choices happen without a cause, that is the same as them happening at random. Causeless events are by definition random events. As philosopher Moritz Sclicke has said, there is "no other opposite to causality" other than chance.¹⁰ But if our choices are chance events, then how could we ever be held responsible for them? If our choices are merely random "accidents" occurring without any cause, criminals could get off the hook because they didn't *mean* to break the law—it just happened for no reason. As one philosopher has said, "if a decision is uncaused, it would be entirely unconnected to our character traits and personality patters...how can we be responsible for a decision that is disassociated from ourselves in this way?"¹¹ "A causeless happening is identical with a chance happening, and consequently an [uncaused] will destroys all responsibility."¹²

Granted, the Arminian will deny that they believe that choices are random. But then the dilemma amounts to this:

How is it that someone comes to act? If there is no sufficient condition [cause], she will not act, or if she does, the act is random. If there is a sufficient condition, then she will act, but the act will be casually determined. Either way, indeterminism [Arminianism] is in trouble. Indeterminists often say the agent 'just acts.' However, this claim simply repeats their view; it does not explain how the agent comes to act without being casually determined or without making a random choice, neither of which is incompatibilistic freedom.¹³

Ability to do otherwise

The inconsistency of Arminianism. Last of all, indeterminism argues that a necessary ingredient to moral responsibility is that the agent *could have done otherwise*. In order to be accountable for an action, you must have the ability to go either way. If there is anything making a certain decision inevitable, your choice is no longer free.

It should be apparent from above that ability to do otherwise is impossible in any choice. For the only way we could do otherwise would be to either choose contrary to our greatest preference or to choose from a state of indifference—

¹⁰ "The Free-Will Determinism Issue is a Pseudo-problem," in *Philosophy: An Introduction Through Literature*, p. 592.

¹¹ Williams, p. 56.

¹² *Philosophy: An Introduction Through Literature*, p. 596.

¹³ Feinberg, pp. 469-470.

which we have both seen to be false. Second, the ability to do otherwise would mean the ability to make choices without a cause: "Saying that an occurrence can be different even if all of the immediately prior conditions are the same is identical with saying that the occurrence is uncaused."¹⁴ As we saw earlier, it is impossible for anything to happen without a cause. Thus, the ability to do otherwise is not even possible.

Further, we saw in our analysis of compatibilism that ability to do otherwise is not necessary to moral accountability. All that is needed for moral accountability is that you are doing what you want, apart from any external compulsion (that is, force). Freedom is the ability to make an unforced decision that is in accordance with your greatest preferences.

Moral inability and natural inability. At this point, a distinction made by Jonathan Edwards (and many other compatibilists, but Edward's seems to be the most clear and in-depth) provides will further show the consistency between divine sovereignty and human accountability. The distinction is between *moral inability* and *natural inability*. Moral inability means the lack of desire to do something. An example would be if I was so content in the library that I just couldn't bring myself to get up and go to class. I had no desire to attend class and therefore was morally unable to go. Natural inability would be if I was physically hindered from going to class. It would be if I was tied to a chair and thus was unable to get to class even if I wanted to.

The point is that natural inability excuses us from responsibility, but moral inability does not. I could not successfully argue that because I didn't have any desire to go to class, I am not morally accountable for skipping. But I could successfully argue that because I was tied to a chair I am not morally accountable for skipping.

The fact that moral inability does not excuse use from blame:

conforms with an almost universal human judgment, for the stronger a man's desire is to do evil the more unable he is to do good and yet the more wicked he is judged to be by men. If men really believed that moral inability excused a man from guilt then a man's wickedness would decrease in proportion to the intensity of his love of evil. But this is contrary to the moral sensibilities of almost all men.¹⁵

¹⁴ Williams, p. 51.

¹⁵ John Piper, "A Response to J.I. Packer on the So-Called Antinomy Between The sovereignty of God and Human Responsibility," unpublished article, March 1976, p. 3.

Thus, compatibilism does acknowledge that one must be able to do otherwise in order to be morally accountable. But it is only a *natural* ability to do otherwise that is necessary, not a *moral* ability to do otherwise. We never have the moral ability to choose other than we do, yet (as we saw) that does not remove accountability. All of our choices are made by moral necessity because they are caused by our greatest preference.

This leads us to the next distinction: moral necessity and natural necessity. They are the other side of the coin. Something is morally necessary if it is my greatest preference. I cannot do other than choose what I want the most. Something is naturally necessary if I am forced to do it. Puppets, for example, are controlled by a natural necessity. The operator simply manipulates the strings that are attached to them and by means of physical forces makes them act. If we do something out of natural necessity, we are not accountable for it. But moral necessity does not remove accountability.

For example, when Martin Luther stood was told by the Roman Catholic church to recant of his teachings, he said that he would not recant and that he could do no otherwise. He believed so strongly in what he was teaching that he necessarily refused to recant. Surely, it would be unreasonable to argue that therefore Luther was not making a genuine choice!

The point is this:

In order to see how God's sovereignty and man's responsibility perfectly cohere, one need only realize that the way God works in the world is not by imposing *natural* necessity on men and then holding them accountable for what they can't do even though they will to do it. But rather God so disposes all things (Ephesians 1:11) so that in accordance with *moral* necessity all men take only those choices ordained by God from all eternity.¹⁶

Conclusion and applications

In conclusion, I am not claiming to understand all (or even most) of the way God works in this area. Our knowledge is very, very small. But I believe that God has made enough information available to us to at least see how His sovereignty is consistent with moral accountability. We have seen that compatibilism succeeds in showing their consistency. We have also seen how the view that denies God's absolute sovereignty and tries to preserve in humans a free-will is not only impossible, but seems to actually destroy human accountability.

It is always important to apply what we know. The things that we have seen here

¹⁶ Piper, p. 3.

should enable us to marvel at the amazing wisdom God has, by which He can determine all things without doing violence to the will of His creatures. It should make us cast ourselves upon God, through Christ, in greater trust, for we are entirely dependant upon Him for all good. This information should also help us to hold to the great truth of God's sovereignty with greater confidence, and I pray that it will help set many minds at rest that have a hard time resting in both the truth of God's absolute sovereignty and human accountability. It is a truly glorious thing that God's Sovereign Kingship is not inconsistent with His moral government of His creatures.

Before ending, we are in a good position to use what we have learned to answer one of the most frequent questions about the sovereignty of God over all things: Why doesn't God's sovereignty make us puppets? I offer nine reasons why we are not puppets (though there are many more):

1. Humans are self-aware, puppets are not.
2. Humans make choices, puppets do not.
3. Humans use logic, puppets do not.
4. Humans have emotions, puppets do not.
5. Humans have preferences, puppets do not.
6. Humans act in accordance with their preferences, puppets do not.
7. Humans consciously do what is determined for them, puppets unconsciously do what is determined for them.
8. Humans understand why they are doing what they are--they act for a reason; puppets do not.
9. Puppets are determined by physical necessity, humans by moral necessity.

Notes

The most convincing and thorough treatment of this issue that I have read the book by Jonathan Edwards called, "A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will, which is supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame," found in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Banner of Truth, 1995 reprint), volume I, pp. 3-93. This article uses many of his arguments, but does not do any justice to the probing analysis given by Edwards. I suggest that anybody who seriously wishes to go in greater depth on this issue, and is willing to put in lots of hard work, read Edwards.

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