

Free Will and Moral Responsibility

by John M. Frame

There are two theories of free will that are often discussed in relation to ethical responsibility. The first is usually called “libertarianism,” and it is typical of Arminian theology. Many philosophers have also argued for it, from Epicurus in ancient times to C. A. Campbell, H. D. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga and many others recently. Indeed, it seems to be something of a consensus among Christian philosophers today that one cannot do justice to moral responsibility without presupposing a libertarian view of freedom.

The libertarian view states that some human decisions and actions, particularly moral and religious decisions, are strictly *uncaused*. In the most sophisticated forms of libertarianism, these decisions are not even caused by our desires or character. They are very insistent on this: a truly *free* act is not an act which carries out our strongest desire; it rather, typically, goes *against* our strongest desire. The libertarian is aware, of course, that our desires are largely a function of our heredity, environment, past decisions and so on. If free decisions are based on desires, he thinks, they are not *fully* free. They are not in this case wholly uncaused.

The libertarian argues that such a view is essential to moral responsibility. For no one is responsible for an act unless he “could have done otherwise.” If I am strapped to a robotic machine which, using my arms, robs a bank, I am not to blame for robbing the bank. I “could not have done otherwise.” Such is the libertarian argument.

I have always felt that this position lacked cogency. For one thing, it denies the rule of God’s sovereignty over the hearts and decisions of human beings, a rule which I find abundantly attested in Scripture (see my lectures on the Doctrine of God). Indeed, in saying that human actions can be “uncaused,” it attributes to man ultimate causality; but in Christianity, only God is the first cause.

For another thing, libertarianism seems to me to be unintelligible on its own terms, for it makes our moral choices *accidental*. R. E. Hobart, in a famous article from the 1930s, wrote to the effect that on the libertarian basis, a moral choice is like my feet popping out of my bed without my desiring them to, and carrying me where I don’t want to go. The attempt to separate decisions from desires is psychologically perverse.

Further, libertarianism, rather than guaranteeing moral responsibility, actually destroys it. How can we be held responsible for decisions, if those decisions are “psychological accidents,” unconnected with any of our desires? Indeed, such a situation would, precisely, negate all responsibility. Certainly it is difficult to imagine being held responsible for something we really didn’t want to do.

And libertarianism would make a hash of ethical and legal evaluation. In order to prove that someone was responsible for a decision or act, we would have to prove that decision or act was uncaused! And how can you prove a negative like that? In fact, as we actually practice ethics and law, causation as such is *never* a factor in judgment, and indeed it could not be. Certain *kinds* of causation (like the robot machine I described above) do remove responsibility; but causation itself does not.

An alternative concept of freedom, one consistent with Reformed theology and held by a number of philosophers (the Stoics, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Hobart, Richard Double et al) is often called “compatibilism,” for on that basis, free will and determinism (the view that all events in creation are caused) are compatible. Compatibilism maintains simply that in making moral decisions we are free to do what we want to do, to follow our desires. As such, compatibilism is the precise opposite of libertarianism, which holds that freedom requires independence from desire itself.

Reformed theology recognizes that all people have freedom in the compatibilist sense. Adam before the Fall acted according to his desires, which then were godly. After the fall, sinners still act according to their desires, but those desires are sinful. The redeemed are enabled by God’s grace, and progressively, to desire things which are excellent; and they are free to act according to those desires. The glorified saints in heaven will have only pure desires, and they will act in accordance with those.

I believe that compatibilist freedom is the main kind of freedom necessary to moral responsibility. There are other kinds of freedom, however, which are also important theologically and ethically. For example, I believe that human beings have a certain freedom to transcend their heredity and environment, so that although these factors may constitute moral challenges, tests, even temptations, we may not use them as excuses for sin. We may not claim to be “determined” by heredity or environment so that we deny our responsibility before God.

Another important kind of freedom is freedom from sin itself. That is the usual meaning of “freedom” in Scripture, as in John 8:32,36. In this sense, fallen

man is in bondage, not able to avoid sinning. Only the grace of Christ can set him free. In this sense, sinful decisions are *not* free decisions, although they are free in the “compatibilist” sense. Does this bondage compromise the sinner’s moral responsibility? Certainly not according to Scripture.

If we have difficulty here, it may be because we fail to understand the nature of the sinner’s bondage. It is a moral and spiritual bondage, not a metaphysical, physical or psychological bondage. If, as in my robot-machine illustration, someone is physically forced to do something he doesn’t want to do, then of course his bondage removes his responsibility for the act. Confronted with his “deed,” the person would have a valid excuse: “I couldn’t help it; I was physically forced to do it.” But imagine someone coming before a human judge and saying, to excuse himself of a crime, “I couldn’t help it, your honor; I was forced to do it by my nature. Since birth I’ve just been a rotten guy!” Surely there is something ironic about appealing to depravity to excuse depraved acts! If our defendant really is a “rotten guy,” then, far from being an excuse, that is all the more reason to lock him up! My point, then, is that although physical (and some other kinds of) bondage can furnish valid excuses for otherwise bad actions, moral bondage is *not* such an excuse. I can’t imagine anyone disputing that proposition once he understands it.

So, there are several different concepts of freedom: libertarianism, compatibilism, moral transcendence of environment, freedom from sin. Indeed, there are many others, too. We speak of “freedom” whenever there is an ability to overcome some potential obstacle. Economic freedom is the ability to purchase and invest, despite the difficulties of achieving it. Physical freedom of various sorts exists when the body is not restrained, e.g., by ropes or prison bars. Legal freedom is the ability to do something without being guilty of a crime, and so on. It is a good idea for us to remember how ambiguous the term “freedom” is. When someone makes an issue of it, we may legitimately ask that person to define what concept of freedom he has in mind.

And we ourselves should try harder to be clear. When you preach evangelistically, noting the proper Calvinist and biblical emphasis on the sinner’s inability, how do you present that? Simply to say that the sinner “cannot” receive Christ is misleading. In many senses he can, and should: he is physically and mentally able; he is not forced to remain a sinner contrary to his desires; nor is he “unable” in the sense that we have some knowledge that divine grace will forever be denied. The sinner’s inability is moral and spiritual; indeed, as we have seen, it is an inability for which he is himself responsible.

Simply to say “you cannot receive Christ” is to motivate a passive response at best, one which simply waits for God to do something. But that is not the response required by New Testament preaching, or by Reformed preaching at its best. The response required is “repent, believe and be baptized.” The sinner is to act, not to wait for God to make him act. Of course if he does act, then we know that God has acted too!

Another area of confusion: I don't know how many times I have asked candidates for licensure and ordination whether we are free from God's decree, and they have replied, “No, because we are fallen.” That is to confuse libertarianism (freedom from God's decree, ability to act without cause) with freedom from sin. In the former case, the fall is entirely irrelevant. Neither before nor after the fall did Adam have freedom in the libertarian sense. But freedom from sin is something different. Adam had that before the fall, but lost it as a result of the fall.