

Free will

Probably the most common definition of **free will** is the "ability to make choices without any prior prejudice, inclination, or disposition," and specifically that these "free will" choices are not ultimately predestined by God.

According to the Bible, however, the choices of man are not only ultimately determined by God, but morally determined by one's nature. Man is indeed a free moral agent and freely makes choices, but in his natural state he necessarily acts in accordance with his fallen nature. Man willingly makes choices that flow from the heart, and sin is also always attributed to the desires of the heart (James 1:13-15). When a person turns to Christ, he does so not because of his own "free will", but because God has supernaturally enabled and moved him to do so through regeneration. God never coerces man's will, rather God gives the ability to believe through the work of the Holy Spirit.

This is a doctrinal distinction between the theologies of Calvinism and Arminianism: In Arminianism, God saves those who believe of their own free will. In Calvinism, God saves those who willingly believe as a result of sovereign enablement by the regenerating work of the Spirit.

Rather than man's will being free, Jesus tells us that, "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin," (John 8:34). The heart, until born again, is "deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9). God saw in man that "every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:44).

Man is most free in heaven, where he is morally unable to sin. True freedom isn't freedom *to* sin, but freedom *from* sin.

Definitions

The Compatibilist believes that free will is "compatible" with determinism (as in the sovereignty of God). The incompatibilist says that the free will is "incompatible" with determinism. The Libertarian is an incompatibilist who consequently rejects any determinism associated with the sovereignty of God. Hence, Libertarian free will is necessarily associated with both Open Theism, which maintains that God does not foreknow or predetermine the free choices of man, and Arminianism, which contends that God in his omniscience foresees man's free choices and reacts accordingly. Libertarian freedom is the general view of liberal Protestantism and a growing number of evangelicals.

Reasons for believing

Compatibilist freedom

In compatibilism, free will is affected by human nature and man will never choose contrary to his nature and desires. Man will always do what he desires most at any particular moment - even when there are competing desires. And man is not able to freely change the direction or the degree of his desires. God is the one who must turn his heart.

"But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart" (Matthew 15:18) "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and

wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (Mark 7:21-23, also Matthew 15:19) "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." (Proverbs 21:1) "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." (Romans 9:14-16) The main arguments for this position are as follows:

- It is overwhelmingly testified to in scripture, even in an explicit manner.
- The Bible speaks of faith as a gift.
- *Sola gratia*, by grace alone, necessarily implies that everything we have is a gift.
- That God is God necessarily implies that he is the primary cause of all reality.
- The nature of God's foreknowledge necessarily implies that God foreordains the future.
- Man cannot be held accountable for his choices if they are ultimately spontaneous and random. The intent of his heart must be the criteria.
- In heaven, when man is finally redeemed from his flesh and its corresponding worldly desires, he will no longer want to sin.
- True freedom is freedom *from* sin, not the freedom *to* sin.

See main page: Compatibilism

Libertarian freedom

In libertarianism (not to be confused with the political ideology), free will is affected by human nature but man retains ability to choose contrary to his nature and desires. Man has the moral ability to turn to God in Christ and believe of his own "free will," apart from a divine, irresistible grace. Indeed, according to Open Theism, God is anxiously waiting to see what each person will do, for he cannot know ahead of time what the choice might be. Or, according to Arminianism, God chooses to save those whom he foresees will believe of their own free will.

The main arguments for this position are as follows:

- The commands and invitations of God in scripture seem to imply a moral ability in man to receive spiritual things, incline the heart, and respond positively.
- It seems unfair that God would blame sinners for their sin if God's will is ultimately irresistible. (cf. Romans 9:19)
- That God is love seems to imply that God would not predestine anyone to go to hell.

See main page: Libertarian free will

Objections

Objections to libertarian freedom

- Libertarian freedom is primarily a philosophical notion, not a scriptural one. It's proponents place an undue reliance upon human philosophy.
- Libertarian freedom necessarily implies that man has the power of *ex nihilo* creation.
- The logical extension of libertarian freedom is that God himself is not free. But God is the freest being in the universe, and *can only* act in accordance with his holy nature. Therefore, true freedom cannot be libertarian.

- The premise goes against the very purpose of the law. "Now the law came in to increase the trespass..." (Romans 5:20). "The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me." (Romans 7:10)
- This is precisely the objection that Paul briefly interacted with in Romans 9:

"You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?" -Romans 9:19-24, ESV- When this very subject arose in Romans 9, Paul quoted the following scripture:

"...though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." " (Romans 9:11-13) There is a mystery here: God loves the world and is kind and patient toward it, meaning to lead it to repentance. But ultimately, God's purpose in election stands, and his electing love is for his Bride alone. "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." (Romans 9:18)

Objections to compatibilistic freedom

1. It seems to be logically contradictory to say that God is totally sovereign and yet people have freedom.
2. Argument from Scripture: the Bible seems to be comfortable with determinism, and the biblical authors do not seem compelled to make a case for free will. ^{^[citations\ needed]^}
3. The argument for compatibilistic freedom is essentially an argument for determinism because it reduces man's freedom to a level that is neither consistent with any traditional definition of "freedom." In other words, the concept of freedom becomes so qualified by God's sovereignty, that the doctrine is essentially irrelevant. If compatibilistic freedom is simply another way to package determinism in more acceptable terms, then it can be argued against with the same reasoning that one argues against determinism.

Theological framework and the will of man

Augustinianism / Calvinism

In Calvinism, man has free will in that he is a free moral agent and makes real choices that will have very real consequences, but he is limited by his fallen nature. God desires from man a worship that comes not ultimately from compulsion, but from love and desire. Man's will is never coerced by God (James 1:13-15). It always flows from his spiritual nature and the desires of his heart. But in his fallen state man cannot discern spiritual things, please God, or trust in Christ (Romans 8:7, 1 Corinthians 2:14). Man is free to *will* what he most desires, but, until born again, his heart is in bondage to sin. Furthermore, his will is ultimately subordinate to the providence and sovereignty of God. This may be regarded as a "compatibilist" view of free will which sees man's free choices as compatible with God's absolute sovereignty. As Augustine put it, "the human will does not obtain grace by freedom, but obtains freedom by grace," (*On Rebuke and Grace to Valentinus*).

See main page: Total depravity, Predestination, and Compatibilism The following views are essentially called "libertarian free will" which re-interprets predestination and determinism on the part of God.

Arminianism

"The providence of God is subordinate to creation; and it is, therefore, necessary that it should not impinge against creation, which it would do, were it to inhibit or hinder the use of free will in man. . ." *The Works of James Arminius*, Vol. 2, in *The Master Christian Library* [CD-ROM] (Albany, OR: AGES Software, 1997), 460 In Arminianism the fall indeed corrupted man's nature but God's "universal prevenient grace" has restored his free will and moral ability toward good. Although the Arminians pay homage to the doctrines of original sin and total depravity, what they give with one hand, they take away with the other -- the result being libertarian free will *by grace* rather than *by nature*.

Semi-Pelagianism and Pelagianism

Semi-Pelagianism acknowledges that man's will and nature are somewhat affected (injured) by the Fall, but mankind retains libertarian free will. The end result is essentially the same as the Arminian view -- the difference being free will "by nature" rather than by the Arminian's universal prevenient grace. In Semi-Pelagianism, man has a free will essentially unaffected by the fall and not limited by his natural desires, inclinations, or prior dispositions. By way of reference, Pelagianism says man's will (and nature) is not affected at all by the Fall.

Quotes

"The decisive point is whether freedom in the Christian sense is identical with the freedom of Hercules: choice between two ways at a crossroad. This is a heathen notion of freedom. Is it freedom to decide for the devil? The only freedom that means something is the freedom to me myself as I am created by God. God did not create a neutral creature, but his creature. He placed him in a garden that he might build it up; his freedom is to do that. When man began to discern good and evil, this knowledge was the beginning of sin. Man should not have asked this question about good and evil, but should have remained in true created freedom. We are confused by the political idea of freedom. What is the light in the Statue of Liberty? Freedom to choose good and evil? What light that would be! Light is light and not darkness. If it shines darkness is done away with, not proposed for choice! Being a slave of Christ means being free"^[2]

References

1. ↑ R.C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Tyndale, 1987) p. 51.
2. ↑ Karl Barth, *Table Talk*, p. 37.

Resources

Calvinist

- *Chosen by God*, by R.C. Sproul ISBN 0842313354
- *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will*, by R. C. Sproul ISBN 0801064120
- *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware (editors) ISBN 0801020034
- *Freedom of the Will*, by Jonathan Edwards ISBN 1573580333
- *The Bondage of the Will*, by Martin Luther ISBN 0800753429

Arminian

- *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, by Clark Pinnock (editor) ISBN 1556616910

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