

Reflections on God, Sin, Free Will, and Eternity

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Libertarian and compatibilist free will

A person has what is known as "libertarian" or "incompatibilist" free will if when taking an action the person has a genuine *ability to do otherwise*, to make a contrary choice. It is what most people mean when they speak of "free will." A person has what is known as "compatibilist" free will if when taking an action the person has the ability to *do as he wants*, even though he has *no ability to do otherwise* because what he wants was determined for him by an external cause (God or natural laws). For example, a person who sits in a room because electrodes in his brain make it impossible for him to want to do otherwise is acting with compatibilist free will but not with libertarian free will. If someone drags him from the room contrary to his electrode-determined desire, he is no longer acting with compatibilist free will because he is no longer able to do as he wants.

The "free will" explanation of moral evil

A common explanation for human sinning (moral evil) is that libertarian free will is necessary for meaningful love, and since God created humans to share in the love he has forever experienced in his triune nature, he created them with libertarian free will. Because it is logically impossible to create humans with libertarian free will and no ability to sin, that ability being inherent in libertarian free will, that is something that even God cannot do, any more than he can create a square circle. Therefore, sin is a necessary possibility in a world inhabited by humans with libertarian free will. In this world, humans chose freely to sin, and God in his great love suffered to redeem all who would accept his remedy for their sin.

An objection to the "free will" explanation

A common response to this explanation, especially from Calvinists, is to deny that libertarian free will is necessary for meaningful love, the love God desires. The alleged proof is the fact redeemed humans will not sin in the eternal state.¹ It is asserted that the only way for sin certainly to be absent in eternity is for God to remove the potential for sin by making it impossible for the redeemed humans to want anything other than to obey, which is compatibilist free will. And if God is satisfied in eternity with the love of one with compatibilist free will, there is no reason to think he would not be satisfied with that love on this side of eternity. In other words, a desire for creatures to express meaningful, God-satisfying love does not require them to be created with libertarian free will, and therefore that desire does not explain human sinning because God could have created humans initially with compatibilist free will and guaranteed that they would not sin.

¹ I use "eternal state" and "eternity" as shorthand for both the intermediate heavenly state and the final state of the new heavens and new earth.

A response to the objection: libertarian predicate for satisfaction with compatibilist love

But if God is indeed satisfied in eternity with the love of a person with compatibilist free will, it does not mean that libertarian free will is not necessary for that satisfaction. God may be satisfied with compatibilist love in eternity only because the person first chose to love him on this side of eternity with libertarian free will. In other words, love given with libertarian freedom may be a necessary predicate for God's satisfaction with love that is later given with compatibilist freedom. The response in eternity of one with a completed character that makes it impossible to want anything other than to obey may be satisfying because that character is the culmination of a transformation one embraced and pursued in choosing freely to love God. It is a monument of libertarian love.

Alvin Plantinga has noted, "It may be God sees it as very appropriate to have free creatures at some stage but not necessarily free creatures at every stage. . . . Maybe the right way to do this, God thinks, and if God thinks it then it's true, is to have them be free at one stage but not at another."² If one accepts, as I do, that Scripture and experience teach that humans on this side of eternity possess libertarian free will, then, contrary to the responder's claim, there is reason to think God would not be satisfied in eternity with the love of one who never possessed libertarian free will. The fact he endowed us with libertarian free will suggests it is relevant to his purpose.

A second response to the objection: libertarian free will need not always result in sinning

In addition to the dubious assumption that satisfaction with compatibilist love in eternity means satisfaction with compatibilist love on this side of eternity, the response assumes that libertarian free will necessarily results in sinning. But that misses the distinction between could and would, between can and will. Libertarian free will requires only the genuine possibility of sinning not an actual choice to sin. It is one thing to wonder why humans who were sinful on earth would no longer choose to sin in eternity if they retained libertarian free will, but that is different from establishing they could not do so.

The Molinist solution to sinlessness in eternity with libertarian free will

One proposed way for redeemed humans to be sinless in the eternal state despite having libertarian free will involves the theological perspective known as "Molinism." This is the idea that God not only knows everything that *could* happen in a given state and everything that *will* in fact happen in that state, but that he also knows everything that *would* happen in any hypothetical state. In other words, he knows all the libertarian free will choices that every human would make in any hypothetical situation. This is called "middle knowledge," and though it is the subject of much debate, many notable philosophers and theologians (e.g., Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig) consider it a valuable insight.

Perhaps God, knowing the humans who would choose to accept his redeeming love in Christ and knowing how they would choose to act in every hypothetical circumstance, planned

² Alvin Plantinga, [Will there be free will in heaven?](#) (accessed on 11/24/22).

an eternal state so that they all would choose freely never to sin in that reality despite having sinned on earth. Libertarian free will remains, and thus sin remains a genuine possibility, but it is a possibility that God knows with certainty will never be realized.

An objection to the Molinist solution

Someone will object that if middle knowledge allows God to create humans and prepare the eternal state so that all redeemed humans in that state will choose freely never to sin, why did he not use that knowledge to create humans and prepare earth so that all humans on this side of eternity would choose freely never to sin? That way, no humans would be damned, but all would enjoy eternity with God as sinless beings.

A response to the objection: a possibly impossible world

Perhaps it is not possible even for God to create a world on this side of eternity that has a population of humans with libertarian free will and in which most of them do not sin. The difference with the eternal state may be that all the humans there will have experienced God's gracious and costly redemption from sin and perceived it in the light of the glory of the eternal state. That may be key to all of them choosing freely never to sin, and since it involves redemption, it is not possible initially to create a human population in that state or condition.

If it is true that most humans will sin in any world on this side of eternity in which they have libertarian free will, a world in which *every* human sins may be more desirable to God than a world in which only *some* sin because in reaching the full number of inhabitants that he desires for the eternal state more people may be lost under the latter than the former. That is, maybe the presence of sinless humans on earth would reduce the number of sinners who respond to God's grace by more than the number of the sinless. That would result in a larger number of people being lost,³ so God in his love may prefer the alternative. We are incapable of knowing such things and therefore are in no position to deny this as a possibility.

This would not mean that God desires sin or that he prefers it to obedience. He desires obedience, but if he is unable to create humans with the libertarian freedom necessary for meaningful love, who on this side of eternity will all obey him, and if creating a world in which only some obey him raises the "damnation cost" of gathering into the eternal habitation the full number who will be completely obedient, it is possible a loving God who desires obedience would create a world in which all humans choose freely to sin. God is not the author of their sin, he does not *determine* that they sin by leaving them no ability to do otherwise, and therefore he is not to blame for their choices, but he created this particular world and foresaw those choices.

³ To illustrate, assume God desires for there to be 10,000 people with him in eternal glory and that each generation includes 1,000 people. Assume further that if all the people are sinners, then 100 per generation (10%) will respond on average to God's redeeming grace, so it will take 100 generations to reach 10,000, during which time 90,000 people will be lost. But if there are 20 sinless people per generation, then maybe only 60 sinners per generation on average will respond to God's redeeming grace, so it will take 125 generations to reach 10,000, during which time 115,000 people will be lost.