

FREE AGENCY: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD & HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

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Peter Briggs

PREFACE

In regard to the significance and importance of human choices, an episode comes to my mind. About forty years ago, one of my managers at General Electric was a man named Web Frayer, who had a delightful way with words. Concerning his authority and responsibility as a unit manager in the managerial hierarchy of General Electric, he once said to me, "I will put my toothpick in the raging torrent and pretend that I am steering the canoe." This statement displays a properly humble attitude regarding the significance of the choices we make in the cosmic scheme of things.

The language we use to represent God's sovereignty vis-a-vis human choices is important. And because our language springs from what we believe in our hearts, it is important that our beliefs concerning this issue be in accordance with the truth of Scripture. As we contemplate the storyline of the Bible, I am impressed by two pervasive thematic strands relating to the issue at hand. First, we are repeatedly enjoined to choose the way of Yahweh – that is, the way of righteousness – that leads to life and reject the way of wickedness that leads to destruction and death. The second strand is the sovereignty of God, according to which he energizes and operates all things according to his premeditated and intentional plan (Ephesians 1:11). Adopting Web's metaphor, God's sovereign purpose is like a mighty river flowing inexorably toward the ocean, and my life is like a tiny kayak in which I am attempting to navigate that river. However toothpick-like the paddle of my choices in comparison with the mighty flow of God's sovereign purpose, the outcome of my journey depends upon my choosing wisely. Through wrong choices, my little kayak may capsize in the rapids or be broken up on the rocks. In sum, my ability to stand before the Son of Man when he comes to judge the living and the dead – in fact, my eternal destiny – depends upon the choices I make in this life.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize that the issue at hand is extremely profound and complex. In terms of the attributes of God, it intersects with the meaning of his sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence. On the human plane, this issue intersects with what we believe about salvation, important life decisions, wayward children, and suffering and evil.

At the back of this paper I have listed some resources that have been helpful to me in reflecting on the subject at hand. In particular, Basinger & Basinger (1986) presents four essays by John Feinberg, Norman Geisler, Bruce Reichenbach, and Clark Pinnock. Perhaps the most helpful aspect of this little book is the fact that each of the authors presents a rebuttal to the positions of the others. In my judgment, this an accessible,

reader-friendly source for understanding some of the terminology theologians and philosophers use in discussing the subject at hand.

ABSTRACT

I hold that human choices are softly determinate. With reference to the four positions set forth in Basinger & Basinger (1986), my position is essentially that of John Feinberg. I hold that included in the scope of softly determinate human choices is the particular choice to turn from sin and embrace Christ as Savior and Lord. However, I also hold that human persons are unable to choose the way of God apart from his grace. I believe that the Spirit of God powerfully appropriates the word of God so as to engender and enable faith and a recognition of one's dire need for salvation, this being the essence of regeneration. However, the manner in which the Spirit interacts with the human spirit in the conversion process is not such as to *make* the choice to embrace Christ, which would be an infringement upon essential human freedom and tantamount to coercion. The assertion that the choice to turn from sin and embrace Christ is freely made by the individual in nowise diminishes the grace of God in salvation even as the receiving of a gift contributes nothing to the merit or value of the gift. I hold that human freedom is compatibilistic, not libertarian. I believe that the choice of God in election is real and not conditioned upon the actualized choices of humans, and that the call of God to salvation is irresistible for the elect and resistible for the non-elect. I believe that the omniscience of God is exhaustive and precise, including the not yet actualized choices of humans and angels. However, I hold that God's omniscience with respect to such choices in nowise infringes on creaturely freedom understood in the compatibilistic sense.

SOME BIBLICAL TESTIMONY

From the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, a theme which permeates all of Scripture is the human responsibility to walk in the way of Yahweh. In Genesis 2:16-17, Yahweh commanded Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Deuteronomy 30:19 Moses commanded the Israelites to choose life by remaining faithful to the covenant with Yahweh. In Joshua 1:8 Yahweh commanded Joshua to keep the law of Moses in order that he might experience true prosperity and success. In Psalm 1 the way of the righteous leading to life is contrasted with the way of the wicked leading to death; the obvious application is that we should adhere to the way of Yahweh in order that we might live. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 Yahweh promised forgiveness and healing if his people would choose to return to him in contrition and repentance. A parallel passage in the New Testament is 1 John 1:9. In fact, the primary purpose of Scripture is to truthfully represent the way of Yahweh and the eternal benefits that accrue to the person who walks in that way. While I affirm that persons cannot walk in the way of Yahweh apart from his enabling grace, from Genesis to Revelation Scripture presupposes a human responsibility to choose that way.

Lest we overinflate the importance of human choices, we also have passages like Jeremiah 10:23:

I know, O Yahweh, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps. [Jeremiah 10:23, adapted from the NASB]

And so we are instructed by James as follows:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. [James 1:5, NASB]

I am impressed by the fact that throughout Scripture God is represented as interacting with mankind in a genuinely interpersonal way. In particular, he is represented as a king ruling over his subjects, as a father disciplining his children, and as a husband loving his bride. As a king, God rules with grace and justice. As a father, he disciplines in love that we might share in his holiness. As a husband, his love is unconditional and self-sacrificing. While I recognize that in the use of these anthropomorphic metaphors God is condescending to our limited ability to understand him, nevertheless I insist that the metaphors truly represent his nature and character, albeit in a limited way. By "truly represent" I mean that God's nature and character are accurately reflected in the metaphors, and that he does not harbor a hidden purpose or agenda that is contradictory to them.

Three attributes of God which relate to human choices are his sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence. A key passage on the sovereignty of God is Ephesians 1:11, which states in effect that God operates and energizes all things according to his premeditated and intentional plan. Other passages which represent the sovereignty of God are Psalm 115:3, Proverbs 16:9 & 33, and Daniel 4:34-35. On the basis of this biblical testimony I affirm that God's sovereign administration of the affairs of the cosmos is both comprehensive and specific. While I hold that God's sovereignty penetrates to the level of human choices, I insist that the manner in which he acts upon the human heart and mind is neither invasive nor coercive. However toothpick-like the paddle of my choices, they are free in the sense of being uncoerced. Therefore, I am responsible for choosing righteously, and I am responsible for the consequences of wrong or unwise choices.

In regard to God's omniscience, I embrace the classical evangelical position that God's knowledge of future human choices is exhaustive and detailed. This is based particularly upon Moses' declarations concerning the gift of prophecy in Deuteronomy 13:1ff and generally upon related declarations which permeate Scripture. And yet by possessing such knowledge God in no wise eliminates human freedom.¹

In regard to God's omnipotence, I again embrace the classical evangelical position that God's authority and power are absolute and without any limitation imposed by factors external to God himself. In particular, God has intentionally and according to his good purposes created a world in which squares cannot be round, bachelors cannot be married, and humans cannot be coerced by him to choose for or against his way.

1 In Basinger & Basinger (1986), Clark Pinnock argues that divine foreknowledge of human choices denies human freedom. However, this assertion is predicated on a libertarian understanding of human freedom; that is, in order to be free the human agent must always be able to choose a course of action that differs from the one actually chosen.

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INTRODUCTION

I prepared this monograph on the interaction between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility for use by the elders of *THE FOOTHILLS* in one of their study sessions in the spring of 2005. The foregoing PREFACE, ABSTRACT, and SOME BIBLICAL TESTIMONY provides a brief overview of the subject. Following this introduction is an expansion of the subjects addressed in the overview.

At the back of the paper are listed a number of resources that have been important to me in reflecting upon this issue. The first one listed, Basinger & Basinger (1986), consists of four essays by John Feinberg, Norman Geisler, Bruce Reichenbach, and Clark Pinnock. This little book represents a relatively compact, reader-friendly treatment of an exceedingly profound and important theological subject. The four positions expressed therein provide a convenient framework for this discussion by defining the broad spectrum of philosophical and theological opinion on the subject at hand.

I open this discussion with a more detailed set of definitions which include a characterization of each of the four positions presented in Basinger & Basinger (1986). Following this is a collection of biblical arguments which support the position on the issue which I embrace. I employ boxes with emphasized text to highlight the major points in the discussion as it unfolds.

DEFINITIONS

God's Sovereignty

John Feinberg turns to Ephesians 1:11 as a compact expression of the sovereignty of God, and so I will do likewise.

... Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined (= *proorizo* = to mark out beforehand) according to His purpose (= *prothesis* = a setting forth, an expressed purpose) who works (= *energeo* = to work or to operate) all things after the counsel (= *boule* = to plan with deliberation) of His will (= *thelema*)... [Ephesians 1:11, NASB]

Following is my attempt to paraphrase this important passage:

Moreover, we have obtained an inheritance, having been marked out beforehand according to the express purpose of Him who operates and energizes all things according to his premeditated and intentional plan...

Feinburg argues that there is an exclusion in this passage; namely, God does not operate and energize all things according to the foreseen, actualized choices of his creatures. While this may be true, the language of Ephesians 1:11 does not require it. With reference to the interaction of God's sovereignty and human choices, this particular text is silent. In particular, it would be inappropriate to conclude from this text that God must control human choices in order to operate and energize all things according to his premeditated

and intentional plan. According to the concept of soft determinism, to which I turn momentarily, God is able to sovereignly administer the affairs of the cosmos, even down to the details of human choices, without infringement upon human freedom.

Based upon Ephesians 1:11 and other texts that relate to the sovereignty of God (e.g., Psalm 115:3, Proverbs 16:9 & 33, and Daniel 4:34-35), I affirm the following:

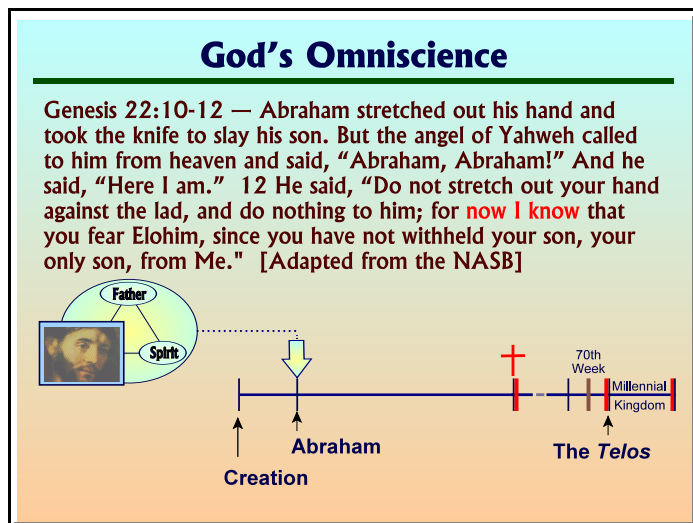
God's sovereign administration of the affairs of the universe is both comprehensive and specific. In fact, it penetrates to the level of human choices. However, the manner in which God acts upon the human personality is not such as to invasively and coercively control human choices.

The Omniscience of God

In accordance with the parameters of prophecy set forth in Deuteronomy 13:1ff, it must be the case that God has exhaustive and precise knowledge of the not yet actualized choices of his creatures.

The question that this precipitates relative to creaturely freedom is this: if God knows exhaustively and precisely a choice that I will make tomorrow, does that mean that my choice is not free? I hold that it does not.

As a classic episode for discussing the omniscience of God with respect to human choices, consider the episode described in Genesis 22:1ff. In particular, note the following passage:



Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for **now I know** that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." [Genesis 22:10-12, NASB, emphasis added]

Based upon his essay in Basinger & Basinger (1986), Clark Pinnock would argue that Abraham's choice to take hold of the knife in order to slay Isaac in obedience to the command of God **did not exist** until the instant that choice was actualized in terms of movement of Abraham's hand. Therefore, Abraham's choice could not be **known** by Abraham, God, or anyone else until the point of actualization. I believe Pinnock would assert that this is the reason for the significant phrase, "now I know." Moreover, Pinnock would argue that if God knew beforehand what Abraham's choice would be, then his choice could not have been free. In his rebuttal of Pinnock, Bruce Reichenbach

demonstrates that Pinnock's logic in support of each of these assertions is flawed (pp. 175-176). In his own essay, Reichenbach demonstrates that the actualization of a choice is the event that **causes** the knowledge of the choice, not the reverse. With Feinberg and Geisler, I hold that God's foreknowledge of human choices is exhaustive and precise. As portrayed in the adjoining figure, the particular event that **caused** God to know that Abraham feared him was the tensing of the muscles in his arm and hand to take hold of the knife. However, was God constrained to **wait** until that event occurred in history in order to have knowledge of it? I hold that God could see that event according to his eternal perspective, but his mere act of seeing it in nowise caused it to happen.

God's foreknowledge of human choices is exhaustive and precise. Whereas I must await the actualization of a choice in history to know what it is, God's perspective transcends time such that he can see human choices from an eternal perspective. God's foreknowledge of human choices, in itself, does not constrain human freedom.

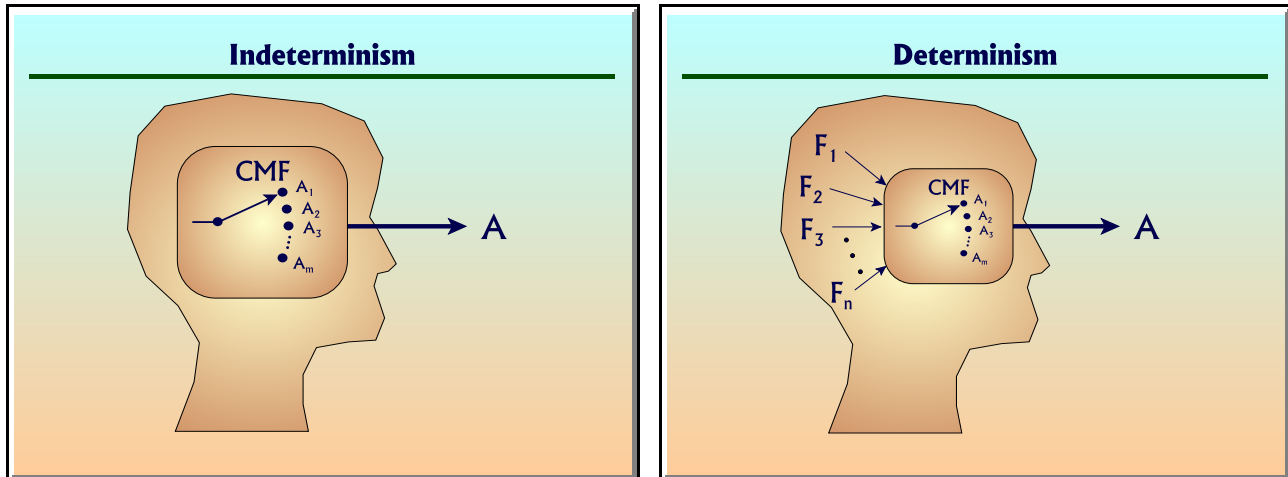
The Determinacy of Human Choices

A key differentiating factor among the various positions on human volition is whether human choices are **determinate** or **indeterminate**. In the present context, to determine means to fix conclusively or authoritatively beforehand the form or character of a thing, such as by forensic declaration. Thus, an object that is determinate is one whose form or character is susceptible to being fixed or specified beforehand; on the other hand, an object which is indeterminate is one whose form or character is not susceptible to being fixed or specified beforehand.

Are human choices determinate or indeterminate? The theological position which affirms that human choices are determinate is called **determinism**, whereas the opposing position is called **indeterminism**. Of the four contributors to Basinger & Basinger (1986), Feinberg and Geisler are determinists, albeit with two different variations. Reichenbach and Pinnock are indeterminists, with Pinnock being the more extreme. In fact, according to Pinnock's open theistic position, human choices do not exist until the point of their instantiation in sequential time; therefore, they cannot be known beforehand, even by God.

I have long held that it is unlikely that a person really understands a thing unless he or she can draw a picture of it. The two figures below delineate my understanding of the two positions of determinism and indeterminism.

Because I want to postpone becoming embroiled in the debate as to whether the human will is free or bound, I employ the symbol **CMF** to designate the human choice-making function (i.e., the will or volition). The **CMF** operates like a logical switch that selects among a set of alternative actions, A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$, to produce a chosen action, **A**. According to indeterminism, the **CMF** is monadic in the sense that it has an output but no inputs – at least the inputs are inscrutable and therefore indeterminate.



The indeterminist asserts that there is nothing which decisively inclines the will to choose one alternative action as opposed to another. On the other hand, the determinist asserts there is a constellation of scrutable factors, F_j , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$, that play upon the CMF and form the basis for the chosen action; therefore, the chosen action is determinate.

Causation of Human Choices

As I move into this phase of the discussion, I insist that we sharply define and differentiate among a set of verbs that could be employed to describe the causation of human choices. In addition to **determine** which has been defined above, I introduce the following technical definitions that will be employed throughout the remainder of this monograph:

- ◆ **Cause** = to be the reason for an action or condition – that is, the factor that lies behind or motivates the action or condition.
- ◆ **Control** = to exercise determinative restraining or directing influence over, to regulate, or to have power over an action or condition.
- ◆ **Make** = to be the instrumental cause of an action or condition – that is, the factor that actually produces or implements the action or condition.

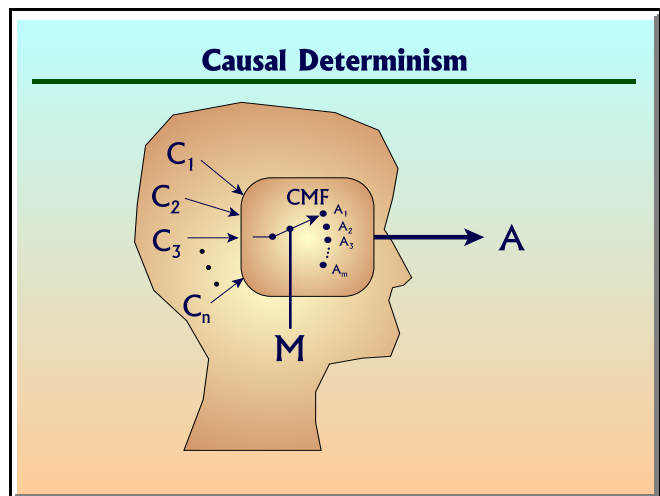
The discussion of what or who causes human choices motivates the definition of two levels of determinism; namely **hard determinism** and **soft determinism**. In fact, I believe the distinction between these two levels of determinism is critical with respect to the issue of free agency. John Feinberg classifies himself as a soft determinist, and he defines what he means by this term through a sequence of examples [Basinger & Basinger (1986), pp. 25-26] which have to do with the situation in which he, as the professor, wants a certain student to leave the classroom. Following is a summary:

- ◆ First, the professor could, if he had sufficient strength, physically lift and bodily remove the offensive student from the classroom. In terms of the verbs defined above, this would be an act of **making** the student leave.

- ◆ Second, the professor could take a loaded pistol from his desk, hold it to the head of the offensive student, and command him to leave the classroom. This would be an act of **causing** the student to leave by means of threatening deadly physical force. It is noteworthy that the student retains a level of freedom in this case that was absent in the former. Based upon knowledge of this particular professor, the student might remain in his or her seat, not believing that the threat of deadly physical force was credible.
- ◆ Third, the professor could **cause** the student to leave by presenting to him or her a compelling benefit which would accrue from the act of freely leaving the classroom; such as, “If you insist on staying in this classroom, you will receive a failing grade, but if you leave right now I will guarantee you at least a C.” In this case, the professor’s knowledge of this particular student, and what would constitute a **compelling motivation** for him or her, is the key to success.

The third scenario illustrates what Feinberg means by soft determinism. The choice is **caused** by the professor through his or her knowledge of the student. In fact, we could assert that the professor is the **efficient cause** of the student’s decision to leave the classroom, where “efficient” means that which has the power or capacity to bring about the desired effect. But the actual decision to leave is **freely made** by the student.

I present the adjoining figure in an attempt to carefully delineate the distinctions among indeterminism, soft determinism, and hard determinism. Note that I have replaced the factors F_j , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$ in the previous diagram with causative factors C_j , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$. In combination, these are the efficient cause of the selection of A from A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$. However, the actual selection is controlled by the factor M . On this basis, the three positions can be described as follows:



- ◆ The **indeterminist** denies the existence of the causative factors C_j that decisively incline the will toward a particular choice of A from the set A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$. The choice of A is freely made by the individual such that the factor M is internal to the individual.
- ◆ The **soft determinist** asserts that there is a set of causative factors C_j that decisively incline the will toward a particular choice of A from the set A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$. Moreover, God is able to orchestrate the factors C_j so as to efficiently cause the choice of A in accordance with his will. However, the actual choice is freely made by the individual such that the factor M is internal to the individual. In other words, there is a soft connection between the factors C_j and M to the extent that the C_j influence but do not control M .

- ◆ The **hard determinist** goes beyond the previous case by asserting that the manner in which God acts on the human personality may be such as to effectively control the factor **M**.

In regard to the causation of human choices, the positions of three of the authors in Basinger & Basinger (1986) are clear. John Feinberg classifies himself as a soft determinist, Bruce Reichenbach is an indeterminist, and Clark Pinnock is a proponent of **open theism**, which is an extreme form of interdeterminism. However, the position of Norman Geisler is difficult to classify in that he claims that human choices are **self-caused**. Geisler's position seems to be a variation of the soft determinist position of John Feinberg.

We need to raise the following question at this point: is God equally concerned about all human choices? The biblical narrative combined with human experience would suggest that he is not. In fact, there are many examples in Scripture in which God is portrayed as allowing humans to do their own thing and reap the consequences of their actions, the parable of the prodigal son being a classic example. On the other hand, Proverbs 21:1 describes the king's heart as follows:

“... like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.”

Peter's statement in Acts 2:23 suggests that God directed or controlled the events leading up to the crucifixion of his Son. In Romans 9:17 Paul puts forth the Pharaoh of the Exodus as a case study that illustrates the principle of God having mercy on whomever he wills and hardening whomever he wills. However, none of the statements in Scripture that suggest a high level of divine control over human choices **require** hard determinism as compared with soft determinism. On the other hand, according to my judgment the indeterminist's position is clearly refuted by texts such as those cited above. Later in our discussion I will bring additional biblical arguments to bear in an attempt to arbitrate among the three candidate views of indeterminism, soft determinism, and hard determinism.

With regard to the causation of human choices, I embrace soft determinism as affording the best fit with biblical data on the issue.

Human Freedom

In what sense are human's **free**? As I read all four of the essays in Basinger & Basinger (1986), it seems to me that Feinberg, Geisler, Reichenbach, and Pinnock would all agree that the essence of human freedom is a lack of coercion by an external agent. However, the definition of freedom assumed by each is different. It is generally the case that determinists like Feinberg and Geisler embrace a **compatibilistic** form of human freedom, whereas indeterminists like Reichenbach and Pinnock embrace a **libertarian** understanding of human freedom. A simple definition of **compatibilism** is that a human choice accords with the nature of the person making the choice. Referring to the causal determinism diagram above, among the causative factors C_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$ are the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the person. In fact, these serve as constraints upon the

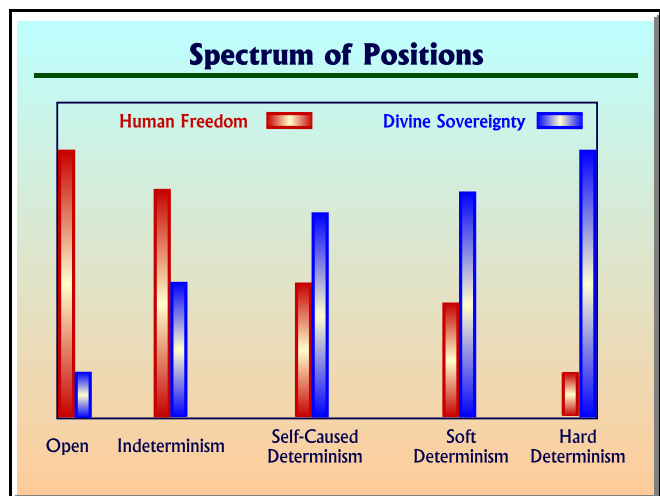
admissible alternatives A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$. A simple definition of libertarianism is that the human person is equally free to choose A or an action other than A . In other words, there are no hard constraints upon the admissible alternatives A_i , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots m$.

According to the concept of soft determinism as set forth above, God through his Spirit can powerfully play upon the **CMF** through the causative factors C_j , $i = 1, 2, 3 \dots n$ so as to be the efficient cause of an alignment of the chosen action with his will. However, I believe the operation of the Spirit stops short of invasively and coercively manipulating **M** – that is, actually *making* the choice of action **A**. Divine control of human choices through direct manipulation of **M** is the essential aspect of hard determinism that distinguishes it from soft determinism. With all four authors in Basinger & Basinger (1986), I reject hard determinism. However, note carefully that human choices are not free in the libertarian sense, but rather in the compatibilistic sense as defined above.

I believe the best fit to the biblical data is that human choices are softly determinate and that humans are free in the compatibilistic sense rather than in the libertarian sense.

Spectrum of Positions

The adjoining figure lays out the spectrum of positions regarding the issue at hand. The red bars represent the relative emphasis given to human freedom, and the blue bars represent the relative emphasis given to divine sovereignty. On the extreme left is the open theism position represented by Clark Pinnock which emphasizes human freedom to the point that divine sovereignty is severely limited. On the extreme right is the hard determinism view which emphasizes divine sovereignty to the point that human freedom is virtually eliminated. In the middle, reading from left to right, is the traditional indeterminism view represented by Bruce Reichenbach, the self-caused determinism view of Norman Geisler, and the soft determinism view of John Feinberg. The position of Arminian theologians would generally be well represented by Reichenbach and perhaps Geisler, although the latter classifies himself as a moderate Calvinist. The position of Calvinistic theologians would generally fall to right of Geisler's position.



BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS

The Way of Yahweh

The **way of Yahweh** is a prominent theme that runs through Scripture. The first occurrence of this phrase is in Genesis 18:19, which is a testimony of Yahweh concerning Abraham as follows:

For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the **way of Yahweh** by doing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him. [Genesis 18:19, adapted from the NASB, emphasis added]

Yahweh commands mankind universally to walk in the way of Yahweh – that is, to conduct their lives in accordance with his commandments. In regard to his way, throughout Scripture he is represented as interacting with persons as a father who is both firm and loving. He warns, disciplines, and judges those who deviate from his way, and he affirms those who walk in accordance with it. In other words, throughout Scripture God is represented as interacting with men on the basis of their being competent moral agents, including holding them accountable for their choices.

The theme of the way of Yahweh pervades the New Testament as well as the Old. The Sermon on the Mount could be appropriately described as a clarification of the way of Yahweh after it had become corrupted by rabbinical teaching. In particular, note Matthew 7:13-14 in which Jesus speaks of two ways, one leading to life and the other to destruction. These two ways correspond to the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked in Psalm 1. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus sternly warns men and women to follow the way that leads to life and avoid that broad and inviting way that leads to destruction. In John 14:6 he represents himself as follows: “I am the **way**, and the truth, and the life.” [John 14:6, NASB, emphasis added] He stands uniquely as the one by whom we are able to approach God, and his life uniquely represents for us the way of Yahweh in terms of human conduct. That is, Jesus is the archetypical righteous man of Psalm 1.

Scholars who embrace hard determinism with respect to the causation of human choices maintain that the Bible’s representation of God interacting with human persons in a genuinely interpersonal way as described above is anthropomorphic. I grant that God is condescending to our human limitations in his self-representation in Scripture, but the question is this: **are the anthropomorphisms of Scripture true or fake?** That is, do they project a limited but true representation of the nature and character of God, or are they a misrepresentation of God’s nature and character?

I hold that the anthropomorphisms of Scripture truly, albeit incompletely, represent the nature and character of God. That is, the nature and character of God goes beyond the representations in Scripture, but not so as to be contradicted by them.

The Case of Job

In the opening chapters of Job, Satan argues that the reason Job lives righteously – that is, according to the way of Yahweh – is because Yahweh blesses him materially. In other words, Satan asserts that Job is like a chimp who is rewarded for good behavior by receiving M & Ms. “Take away the M & Ms and Job will curse you to your face,” Satan claims. According to the story of Job, Yahweh not only proves Satan wrong, but refines Job’s character in the process.

However, the story of Job only makes sense if Job’s choices are at least as free as the soft determinist claims. Suppose the hard determinists are right and that human choices are actually controlled by God. Then the story of Job proves nothing. In fact, Satan would have had a bullet-proof case against Yahweh. “Since you control Job’s choices so as to make him behave righteously, the testimony of his life proves nothing,” he could have asserted.

The story of Job only makes sense if his choices were freely made by him rather than being invasively and coercively controlled by God.

The Manifold Wisdom of God

Ephesians 3:9-11 relates significantly to the subject at hand. It reads as follows:

... God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord... [Ephesians 3:9b-11, NASB]

The ***rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places*** is a technical term that Paul defines in the 6th chapter. These are the demonic overlords, the minions of Satan, against whom we wrestle according to Ephesians 6:10ff. We Christians provide the basis for God to teach his manifold wisdom to these rulers and authorities as we conduct our lives in accordance with the way of Yahweh. In fact, the epic story of Job is the biblical case study in how God accomplishes this teaching; namely, by allowing Satan and his minions to inflict suffering upon the saints. As in the case of Job, we demonstrate the manifold wisdom of God by comporting ourselves in a righteous and godly way in the face of such suffering.

But suppose our choices are God-controlled in the hard deterministic sense? Then I would maintain that our conduct proves nothing more than God’s skill as a puppet designer and manipulator.

Our conduct establishes nothing concerning the manifold wisdom of God in accordance with Ephesians 3:9b-11 and the case study of Job if our choices are invasively and coercively controlled by God.

Divine Influence Over Human Personalities

There are numerous passages that hard determinists can point to which suggest that God influences human choices in a way that seems tantamount to coercive control. I would respond that the whole point of the biblical narrative is knocked into a cocked hat if human choices are God-controlled in the hard deterministic sense. Therefore, while it is irrefutably the case that God is able to influence the choices of his creatures in accordance with the concept of soft determinism, it must be the case that his influence through his Spirit stops short of infringing upon human freedom to the degree that the hard determinist suggests.

The Spirit of Yahweh interacts with human personalities, and at times powerfully so, but never so as to actually control or make human choices in the hard deterministic sense, which would be tantamount to coercion, and therefore an essential denial of human freedom, even freedom of the compatibilistic sort.

The Act of Faith in Conversion

Does the concept of soft determinism apply to the choice to turn from sin and embrace Christ as Savior and Lord? I hold that it does. By stating this I am in no wise suggesting that persons can choose to live in accordance with the way of Yahweh apart from his grace. That is, human persons are not morally competent in the Pelagian sense. The radical Fall of Genesis 3 means that our wills are naturally inclined toward evil, and we need a radical deliverance from bondage to sin and death just like the Israelites needed a radical deliverance from their state of bondage in Egypt.

There are those who would argue that if the choice to turn from sin and embrace Christ as Savior and Lord is **made** by the individual in the soft deterministic sense, then the grace of God is diminished. I stand with Geisler in asserting that the act of receiving a gift **in no wise contributes to the merit of the gift**. [Basinger & Basinger (1986), p. 80] In fact, **the act of receiving a gift is not in the least meritorious with respect to the gift and the giver**. To suggest otherwise is to insult the giver – in this case, God himself.

Another possible argument against my position is based upon Ephesians 2:1ff where Paul describes our natural state as being “dead in our trespasses and sins.” Are we corpse-like with respect to the grace of God and the proclamation of the gospel? How does the Spirit of God appropriate the proclamation of the gospel to bring about conversion? The Bible describes the conversion event imprecisely so there remains a good bit of mystery as to exactly how it takes place. The principal question in this regard has to do with the point at which regeneration takes place. The following two passages in Romans speak to this question:

If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the **spirit is alive because of righteousness**. [Romans 8:10, NASB, emphasis added]

... For with the heart **a person believes, resulting in righteousness**, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. [Romans 10:10, NASB, emphasis added]

In combination, these two passages enable us to recognize the logical order of the conversion process, which is that the exercise of faith (“a person believes”) is the predicate for justification (“resulting in righteousness”), and justification is the predicate for regeneration (“the spirit is alive”). According to my judgment, Millard Erickson² has formulated the best synthesis of the conversion process, which is summarized as follows:

1. **Effectual call.** The “word of Christ” – that is, the proclamation of the gospel which is powerfully appropriated and applied to the heart and mind of the individual by the Holy Spirit – engenders and enables faith in accordance with Romans 10:17 as follows: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” By means of the effectual call, the person is caused to regard sin with revulsion and Jesus as his or her only hope for deliverance.
2. **Repentance and faith.** These are the inter-linked human responses to the gospel which are efficiently caused by the ministry of the Spirit, but the responses are freely chosen and made by the person in accordance with soft determinism. This genuine human response involves a turning from sin and an embracing of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.
3. **Justification.** God forensically declares the person to be righteous. The garment metaphor helps us to understand how this works. The white robe of righteousness represents the perfect righteousness of Christ; it is bestowed as a free gift to cover our nakedness before God.
4. **Regeneration.** The Holy Spirit quickens or makes alive the human spirit, which was effectively dead with respect to God prior to conversion. This is the sense in which we “were dead in our trespasses and sins” in accordance with Ephesians 2:1. The restored connection with the living God through the human spirit and the Holy Spirit causes us to begin walking in the way of Yahweh leading to life.

I hold that the choice of turning from sin and embracing Christ is efficiently caused by God, but actually made by the individual. Conversion is brought about by the effectual call of the Spirit of God, which entails his powerfully appropriating the proclamation of the gospel and applying it to the human heart to bring about conviction of sin and a recognition of one's desperate need for salvation. The human response to the effectual call is repentance and faith, and the divine response to repentance and faith is justification followed by regeneration.

Solicitations Toward Evil

James makes clear that solicitations toward evil choices are not caused by God as follows:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived,

2 Erickson (1999), pp. 945-959.

it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. [James 1:13-15, NASB]

Moreover, Paul declares that with a solicitation toward evil always comes a way of escape as follows:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. [1 Corinthians 10:13, NASB]

Consider Adam in the Garden in accordance with the narrative in Genesis 3. Picture Eve with two pieces of fruit, one in each hand. One piece of fruit has a bite taken out of it. The other is presented to Adam for him to eat. Did anyone or anything external to Adam **make** him accept the fruit from Eve and eat it? Did God act on Adam's personality to decisively incline his will toward accepting the fruit from the hand of his wife and eating it? Based upon the statements by James and Paul quoted above, we can emphatically answer these questions in the negative. There was certainly a constellation of factors coming to bear upon Adam's choice, including the prohibition of Yahweh Elohim, the fact that Eve was standing alive before him, her report concerning the fruit, etc. These were all factors of which Adam's choice was a function. In this particular decision scenario, Adam's will was decisively inclined to take the fruit and eat it on the basis of the empirical evidence presented by Eve as opposed to the command of Yahweh Elohim.

I believe the declarations of James 1:13ff and 1 Corinthians 10:13 decisively refute hard determinism, at least in regard to solicitations toward evil.

Whereas Adam's **CMF** (i.e., will) was unaffected by the Fall when he made his disastrous choice, ours are inclined toward evil choices on account of the Fall. ***I hold that this fact impacts the kinds of choices we make, but not our ability to make choices.***

Foreknowledge and Foreordination

Theologians of the Calvinistic school insist on linking divine foreknowledge and foreordination in such a way that, effectively,

Foreknowledge (*proginosko*) = Foreordination

Against this, I insist that blurring the distinction between the divine acts of foreknowing and foreordaining blinds us to what the Scripture is saying. In this regard, Feinberg criticizes Geisler for his failure to articulate the logical priority of foreknowledge and foreordination with respect to God's choices and actions [Basinger & Basinger (1986), p. 88]. Because of Geisler's commitment to divine simplicity in regard to God's choices and actions, his treatment of this issue is not satisfactory. Feinberg's position is clear, however: ***divine foreordination always takes priority with respect to foreknowledge***. Against Feinberg, I hold that according to the order that God has sovereignly established, some of his

choices and actions are truly conditioned upon human choices. Scripture is replete with examples, of which two are clearly and unambiguously stated in 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 1 John 1:9.

On account of the eternal perspective of his omniscience, God does not have to await our choice and action to take place in sequential time. But I would hold that his foreordained choice and action is logically predicated upon ours in regard to conditional promises such as 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 1 John 1:9.

Another noteworthy narrative in regard to the issue at hand is found in Genesis 22, a passage we have already examined. In Genesis 22:16 Yahweh states that the blessing he will bestow upon Abraham is predicated upon Abraham's demonstrated obedience. While we recognize the operation of the Holy Spirit in enabling Abraham to trust Yahweh, to believe that Yahweh invasively and coercively controlled Abraham's choice to sacrifice Isaac according to the concept of hard determinism contradicts the straightforward reading of the narrative. Thus, what God foreordained concerning Abraham and his descendants was predicated upon his foreknowledge, and his foreknowledge was caused by Abraham's demonstrated obedience in the willingness to sacrifice Isaac. In like manner, God's relenting from judgment and extending mercy to the people of Nineveh was conditioned upon and caused by Jonah's preaching and their penitential response to that preaching.

In summary, Scripture does not allow the categorical assertion that foreknowledge is always predicated upon foreordination, for this would do violence to the many conditional responses of God to human choices that are found throughout Scripture.

Comments on Bondage of the Human Will According to Luther

I cannot leave the subject being addressed by this paper without commenting on Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*. In their introduction to Luther (2002), J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston characterize this work as, "the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen. [[Luther (2002), p. 40] Beginning on page 163, Luther responds to Erasmus regarding texts such as Ezekiel 18:23 which express a divine desire or will that all human persons should be saved. Of the sizeable number of texts that contribute to this biblical theme, perhaps the most explicit are 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9. Regarding the text in Ezekiel, and, by implication, the other texts as well, Luther makes the following statement:

... Ezekiel does not here discuss. He speaks of the published offer of God's mercy, not of the dreadful hidden will of God, Who, according to His own counsel, ordains such persons as He wills to receive and partake of the mercy preached and offered. This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored. [Luther (2002), p. 169]

What is Luther stating here? He asserts that lurking beneath or behind the "published offer of God's mercy" is a "dreadful hidden will of God" which intentionally limits salvation to a

few rather than making it accessible to all. In other words, the published offer actually misrepresents the real intention of God with respect to accessibility to salvation, according to Luther. In view of Luther's role as the father of the Reformation, I find this position exceedingly troubling.

It is not my intention here to become embroiled in a debate over limited atonement, which is postponed for treatment in a future paper. My concern is over Luther's representation of the contents of the Bible. If the heart of God is misrepresented by Ezekiel 18:23 and all of the other passages that are parallel to it, then should we not call into question the entire Bible? How can we discern which of the "precious and magnificent promises" [2 Peter 1:4, NASB] has lurking beneath or behind it a dreadful and hidden purpose of God that is actually contradicted by the published promise?

I sharply repudiate Luther's suggestion, which effectively undermines the authority of the entire Bible in my view. Instead, I maintain that all of Scripture provides an accurate, albeit limited, representation of the divine mind and will.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this discussion, I firmly believe that the concept of soft determinism, which corresponds to the position of John Feinberg in Basinger & Basinger (1986), best accords with the biblical data. In regard to solicitations toward evil, the concept of hard determinism is soundly refuted by James 1:13ff and 1 Corinthians 10:13. Moreover, the concept of hard determinism when applied to righteous choices, such as in the case of Abraham, contradicts the straightforward reading of Scripture. In the case of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, Paul's argument in Romans 9:17 does not require that God invasively and coercively controlled this man's choices, nor does the text in Exodus require this.

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