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The Christian Fathers, Free Will, and Physics

The freedom of man has been a topic for debate throughout history. One of the issues that dominated early Christian thought was the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the free will of individuals. Today, the debate continues but this time between determinism and free will. The obstacles today that stand in opposition to free will are natural laws that appear to determine each subsequent event. In older times, the greatest obstacle to be overcome in understanding how man could be free was understanding how man could be free in light of a God who was sovereign and foreknew every event. Many great Christian fathers wrestled with this idea, including Augustine, Martin Luther and Thomas Aquinas. They stand as models of great Christian intellectuals who sought to understand the truth of man's nature in light of the knowledge they had.

Augustine affirmed both the foreknowledge of God, and man's free will. He "assert[s] both that God knows all things before they come to pass, and that we do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it." He then goes on to explain what he means by this claim. One of the first issues he must address is how God can still foreknow events if we are freely causing them. To this, Augustine explains:

> But it does not follow that, though there is for God a certain order of all causes, there must therefore be nothing depending on the free exercise of our own wills, for our wills themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain to God, and is embraced by His foreknowledge, for human wills are also causes of human actions; and He who foreknew all the causes of things would certainly among those causes not have been ignorant of our wills.

From God's end, He could have taken into account what we would will, and so He could still foreknow all events.

This still leaves the question of if whether or not our wills or actions are still free, if they are foreknown. To answer this question, though, one must first understand what is

meant by will. As Augustine explains, "our wills, therefore, *exist as wills*, and do themselves whatever we do by willing, and which would not be done if we were unwilling." Our will is that part of us which might most closely by associated with choice. In willing something, we are choosing to do it. In not willing something, we are choosing to not do it. Augustine offers an explanation of how this will of ours can be free while still foreknown by God

> It is not the case, therefore, that because God foreknew what would be in the power of our wills, there is for that reason nothing in the power of our wills. For he who foreknew this did not foreknow nothing. Moreover, if He who foreknew what would be in the power of our wills did not foreknow nothing, but something, assuredly, even though He did foreknow, there is something in the power of our wills. Therefore we are by no means compelled, either, retaining the prescience of God, to take away the freedom of the will, or, retaining the freedom of the will, to deny that he is prescient of future things.

Augustine's argument hinges on the idea that God foreknows all things, and that He foreknew our will. And he thinks the fact that God foreknew our will actually is a reason to believe in the power of our will, because God could not foreknow something that does not exist. Thus instead of God's foreknowledge eliminating our will, it actually affirms it. It allows God's prescience while retaining human freedom.

Martin Luther similarly admits that God did give man free will. However, he defines this will differently than Augustine. According to Luther, "I confess that mankind has a free-will, but it is to milk kine, to build houses, etc., and no further; for so long as a man is at ease and in safety and is in no want, so long he thinks he has a free-will, which is able to do something." He believes that man's free will has the power to do what he wants when those things he wants are easy. However, he observes that when man is faced with difficult situations, they often do not do what they want. And so in this sense man's will fails to be free. He also notes that man does not have freedom of will when it comes to spiritual conversions. Luther argues that "the will of mankind works nothing at all in his conversion and justification," and that only "after the Holy Ghost has wrought in the wills of such resistants, then he also manages that the will be consenting thereunto." Man's ultimate fate is

not in his power to decide. He is subject to the Holy Ghost to bring about a conversion, as well as for the Holy Ghost to further disposition His will so that he will continue in his faith. While Luther does grant man some freedoms in easy and day-to-day activities he denies man's freedom when it comes to harder issues, such as spiritual issues. In this sense, Luther's idea that man can be both free and predestined can be understood. Man is not free to save himself—that is predestined by God. But man is free in other areas of his life.

Thomas Aquinas takes a view of free-will more similar to that of Augustine. The way he defines it is more in keeping with it being something true of our choices, and not as limited as Luther makes it out to be. Aquinas believes that,

> man acts from judgment, because by his apprehensive power he judges that something should be avoided or sought. But because this judgment, in the case of some particular act, is not from a natural instinct, but from some act of comparison in the reason, therefore he acts from free judgment and retains the power of being inclined to various things.

The components of free-will as defined here include making judgments based on reason and not instinct, and being able to discern which outcome of a choice will be more desirable than the other. He also describes free-will as "the cause of its own movement, because by his free-will man moves himself to act." Thus free-will is also the source of man's movements and actions. Aquinas also distinguishes free-will as a power, as opposed to a habit.

To help explain how human free will and a sovereign God can both exist, Aquinas distinguishes between universal and particular causation. He says, "A thing can escape the order of a particular cause; but not the order of a universal cause. For nothing escapes the order of a particular cause, except through the intervention and hindrance of some other particular cause." He gives the example of a tree burning from the cause of a fire can be deterred by another cause of throwing water on it. And so particular causes are subject to the influence of other causes, whereas nothing can deter a universal cause. Man's free will would fall under the category of particular cause and therefore be subject to the influence of

other causes—particularly God's will, which would be the universal cause. Man does have free will, but like other particular causes it can be influenced one way or another by the universal cause.

Since these Christian fathers wrote their views on free will, new challenges have come into play that must be addressed. The development of Newtonian physics pointed towards a deterministic universe that neatly followed a set of rules for how it should operate.[1] This idea, taken to its fullest extent, would result in the predictability of all events. One of the more famous quotes that exemplifies this is by Laplace, and goes as follows:

> We ought to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its antecedent state and as the cause of the state that is to follow. An intelligence knowing all the forces acting in nature at a given instant, as well as the momentary position of all things in the universe, would be able to comprehend in one single formula the motions of the largest bodies as well as the lightest atoms in the world, provided that the intellect were sufficiently powerful to subject all data to analysis; to it nothing would be uncertain, the future as well as the past would be present to its eyes.[2]

This "intelligence" does not refer to the omniscient God of the Christian fathers, but rather to a naturalistic intelligence which somehow evolves to reach the necessary capacity.

The next major scientific theory that greatly influenced the debate on determinism and free will was quantum physics. It questions the predictability that the Newtonian mechanics depends on. To a certain extent events are predictable, but once a certain level is reached predictability becomes impossible. This is seen when looking at the human brain: "If we analyse what we know so far about the human brain we do indeed find it to be explicable in biochemical and computational terms, down to a particular level. But if we keep on going the quest for determinism runs into quantum uncertainty."[3] This problem of a universe that is no longer as predictable as man assumed it to be is further supported by physicist J.C. Maxwell. He "recognized that there exist many physical situations in which any uncertainty, however small, in our knowledge at one time leads to increasing uncertainty

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[1] Peterson, 883.
[2] Atmanspacher, 471-472.
[3] Barrow, 167.

in determining the future state. Even if we had the perfect laws of Nature in our possession, they might be of no use in predicting the future in such circumstance."[4] The developments of quantum mechanics for the most part ruled out the strict determinism of Newtonian mechanics, leaving indeterminism. Events were no longer predictable, and hope of an intelligence that would one day be able to perfectly predict the future was lost.

More modern theologians have dealt with the new advances in science and have integrated them to still leave room for human free will. John Polkinghorne is one example of a theologian who is also a physicist. He argues that "the indeterministic character of quantum measurement implies that the universe itself is indeterministic."[5] This breakdown in determinism then leaves room for alternative causation. The chaos theory "allows divine action to take place without interference in the laws of the natural order."[6] And where there is room for divine action, there would also be room for human free will. He defines human freedom as "the strong sense of the freedom to do some act and the freedom not to do it."[7] He believes that any explanation of reality that does not account for human intentionality—allowing man to choose to do or not do an act—is insufficient.

Polkinghorne also presents an argument that points to the necessity of human freedom for human reason to work. He starts by considering the fact that man has had what we believe to be a rational discourse over the topic of free will and determinism.

> The debate about human freedom or determinism has a long history, but I cannot myself believe that debate to have been a sequence of mouthings by automata, rather than a rational discussion. The exercise of reason is closely allied to the exercise of freedom, for, to put it crudely but directly, if the brain is a machine, what validates the program running on it? […] With Thomas Nagel I believe that 'An evolutionary explanation of our theorizing faculty would provide absolutely no confirmation of its capacity to get at the truth.' Such a capacity requires human rational judgment to enjoy an autonomous validity which would be negated if it were the by-product of mere physical necessity.[8]

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[4] Barrow, 308.
[5] Peterson, 883.
[6] Peterson, 882.
[7] Polkinghorne, 12.
[8] Polkinghorne, 12.

If man is nothing more than a series of events, and our thoughts are nothing more than physical reactions in our brains, then no room is left to actually validate any of those thoughts. There is no "reason" to think they are actually true. And so for a theory such as determinism to claim to be true, it must present an explanation for how man can reason anything to be true at all. This is something determinism fails to do. An alternative theory must then give man the freedom to be unbound by strictly the physical reactions in his brain. Some part of him must be free to analyze and process data if he is to really be able to reason.

Polkinghorne represents a modern theologian's answer to the question of whether or not man has free will. One can only guess what the Christian fathers would have thought if they had today's scientific knowledge available to them. As men who seem eager to discover the truth it would be interesting to see how they assess human freedom in regards to science. Freedom is something they all value, and they all emphasize the importance of man's ability to choose one action over another. This is what they are defending when they mean freedom. If modern theologians such as Polkinghorne have found ways to reconcile physics and human freedom, then no doubt the Christian fathers would be able to do so as well. Human freedom has survived the conflict with an omniscient God, a deterministic universe, and quantum physics. One can only wonder what challenge human freedom will come up against next, and if it will continue to survive.

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