

# Do Humans Have Libertarian Free Will?

By David P. Diaz, Ed.D.

## Background



Materialistic naturalism<sup>1</sup> is a worldview that asserts that physical matter is all that exists and that material causes determine all human actions. All effects arise from a string of material causes that recede from the present into the distant past. If physical matter is all that exists, then free will is an illusion, all acts are determined.

Others believe in the existence of immaterial, metaphysical aspects of the universe (e.g., numbers, thoughts, first-person experiences, supernatural beings), which are distinguishable from matter. Of this group, many believe that God<sup>2</sup> has endowed his human creatures with the ability to freely choose one action over another.

For most people, free will seems to be a given. Nearly all of us act in our ordinary life as if we can choose between a lunch of salami & pickles on rye, on the one hand, and ham & cheese on wheat, on the other. And you probably wouldn't try to convince your wife that she is deluded in thinking she isn't free to select one book to read rather than another. However, since the term "free" has

different uses, it seems like a good idea to define what we mean by “free will.”

“*Libertarian free will:  
one must have the  
freedom to choose  
otherwise.*”

The libertarian<sup>3</sup> view of free will affirms that an action is genuinely free only if one can choose otherwise. Libertarian freedom requires that a free act “not be causally determined by factors beyond one’s control.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, a free act is not compulsory in any sense; a person must be able to change her mind and do something different if she so chooses. Importantly, libertarians believe that the *freedom to do otherwise* is necessary for determining moral responsibility.

The question addressed in this brief article is: “Do humans possess libertarian free will?”

## **Reasons for Affirming Libertarian Free Will**

The short answer to the above question is yes; humans possess libertarian free will.<sup>5</sup> There are at least two primary reasons:

1. Libertarian free will is consistent with our everyday experience of free choices.
2. Libertarian free will makes the best sense of human moral accountability.

On the first count, Dew and Gould suggest that free will is a self-evident feature of our experience: “It is a datum of human experience that our actions seem to be free.”<sup>6</sup> For example, in our day-to-day experience, we typically do not question

whether we can spontaneously scratch an itch, raise a hand, or wiggle a toe. Most of us just intuitively know that we can do these things freely and under our personal powers.

Further, science bases its methodology on the notion of free will. Researchers typically believe they have the freedom to choose one hypothesis or research method over another. They are confident that they are free to select the respective sources for their literature review and the type of statistical method they should use. Scientists don't think twice about whether they have free will when writing up the results of their research. One will likely never see the following limitation written into any research article: "I do not have free will, and therefore all my conclusions are determined." Thus, libertarian free will is a common-sense notion that seems just as self-evidently true in our daily lives as it does in scientific research.

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Second, humans have *moral obligations or duties*<sup>7</sup> for which they are held accountable, and they become valid recipients of moral praise, blame, reward, or punishment based on these obligations. If people are to be held morally responsible for their decisions, they must cause their own moral actions. Libertarian free will is self-caused freedom, which means a free agent is involved in choosing. When witnesses take the stand in a courtroom, they need to tell the truth under threat of perjury. So, according to the justice system, a witness is considered perfectly capable of telling the truth or lying.

Furthermore, how could we punish or imprison anyone for violating penal codes or other laws if their actions are determined? If one has no choice but to think or act a certain way, then one cannot say that someone *ought* to do one thing or another (“ought” implies “can”). If determinism is true, one cannot do anything

authentically right (or wrong) because one cannot act otherwise. Any punishment or reward would be completely arbitrary.

Christians believe that God has called all humanity to believe in Christ as Savior for the forgiveness of sins (1 Jn. 3:23; Acts 10:43). For this offer to be valid, one must be free to obey or disregard such a calling. An offer of salvation and forgiveness would be neither genuine nor fair unless one can freely accept or reject it.

For the two reasons discussed above, it seems rational to affirm a belief in libertarian free will. The remainder of this article will answer two objections to the notion that God has created humans with libertarian freedom.

## God's Foreknowledge and Free Will

One common objection to free will, which I will call the *Incompatibility Argument*, asserts that human free will is incompatible with God's foreknowledge.<sup>8</sup> The argument goes something like this:

1. If God knows in advance that Joe will clap his hands *tomorrow at 4:00 pm* (t1), then *it must be the case* that Joe will clap his hands at t1.
2. If it must be the case that Joe will clap his hands at t1, then Joe *is not free to refrain* from clapping his hands at t1.
3. Conclusion: *Joe isn't free* with respect to clapping his hands at t1.

If this argument is sound, then no one ever performs free actions. The argument leads us to believe that if God *knows* all things in advance, then no action can be truly free. So, if God knows ahead of time that Joe will perform an action (A), then it logically follows that Joe will *necessarily* perform A. Indeed, the argument attempts to show that God's *foreknowledge* of A somehow *constrains* Joe from doing anything except A.

The problem with the argument is premise 1. The first premise is ambiguous because it could mean one of two things. One possible meaning is:

(1a) *Necessarily*, if God knows in advance that Joe will clap his hands at t1, then indeed Joe will clap his hands at t1.

Or it could mean:

(1b) If God knows in advance that Joe will clap his hands at t1, then it is *necessary* that Joe clap his hands at t1.

“*It is true that God knows what future actions will take place, and it is also true that humans are free to act one way or another.*”

The difference is subtle but critical. The Incompatibility Argument requires the truth of (1b), but the argument supports only (1a): Necessarily, if God foreknows A (i.e., Joe will clap his hands at t1), it follows that A will happen, but it *does not follow* that A will happen *necessarily*. If humans possess libertarian free will, then A could fail to happen. And if it were to fail to transpire, then God's foreknowledge would have been different.

The argument, as it stands, commits a fallacy in modal reasoning.<sup>9</sup>

The crucial difference is whether God's *knowing* something will come to pass also *determines* it to happen. The answer is no. If God foreknew that a person's choice would not happen, then God would not have foreknown it. He would have foreknown something else. God's infallible knowledge simply guarantees that if God knows in advance that a person will choose action B instead of A, then God would have held belief B about this future action. So, *it is true* that God knows what future actions will take place, and *it is also true* that humans are free to act one way or another.

# God's Omnipotence and Free Will

Many people suggest that if God is all-powerful and all-good, he would prevent all evil and suffering in the world. Indeed, they say, if an omnipotent God *can* prevent suffering, then he would be morally deficient if he doesn't. However, such a view includes an unstated assumption: An omnipotent God can do *anything whatsoever*. But this makes no sense. Even an omnipotent God must be limited by what is logically possible. After all, what benefit would it be for an infinite being to create a square circle, a married bachelor, or a false truth?

“*In other words, being all-powerful means that God can do anything as long as it is consistent with his nature.*”

The explanation lies in a correct understanding of God's attribute of omnipotence. Theologian Thomas Oden defines omnipotence as “the perfect ability of God to do all things that are *consistent with the divine character*.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, being all-powerful means that God can do *anything* as long as it is *consistent with his nature*. So, for example, God is always truthful (Jn. 3:33, 34), and his word is truth (Jn. 17:17). Therefore, *God's nature is such that it is impossible for him to lie* (Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Also, *God cannot not exist* because he, by nature, exists eternally (Ps. 90:2). God is who he is and nothing other. Therefore, he cannot do anything that violates his nature, including that which is logically impossible.

So, what does God's omnipotence have to do with free will? Plantinga suggests that free will is a significant good that is necessary in its own right: “A world containing creatures who are significantly free... is more valuable, all else being equal than a world containing no free creatures at all.”<sup>11</sup> God may allow humans to freely choose between good and evil acts because he considers it more valuable than not having truly free creatures. It may be that free will is such an

essential property for humans that God would not consider rescinding it just to prevent some evil and suffering. Therefore, even if an all-powerful God *could* eliminate all suffering, perhaps an all-good God *would* not. Although human free will provides the possibility of some evils, maybe free will is a necessary characteristic of a life worth living.

## Conclusion

Libertarian free will is a common-sense attribute of our lives and is a necessary feature of the world if we intend to hold humans morally responsible for their actions. God's foreknowledge does not preempt human free will; it simply means that God knows what future choices a person will make. If a person will choose different actions in the future, then God will hold different beliefs about these future events.

God's omnipotence does not mean that he can do anything whatsoever. It is impossible for God to do things inconsistent with his nature or that are logically impossible. Such a characteristic of an infinite being should be considered a perfection, not a defect. Thus, the preservation of free will, even though it may be the root of some moral evils, means that God considers free will a valuable and necessary characteristic for genuine happiness and fulfillment in human creatures.

## About the Author:

David P. Diaz, Ed.D. is an author, retired college professor, and publisher of the *Things I Believe Project*. His writings have spanned the gamut from peer-reviewed technical articles to his memoir, which won the 2006 American Book Award. Dr. Diaz holds a Bachelor's and Master of Science degrees from California Polytechnic State University, a Master of Arts in Philosophical Apologetics from Houston Christian University, and a Doctor of Education specializing in Computing and Information Technology from Nova Southeastern University.

# Footnotes