

Do Humans Have Libertarian Free Will?

By David P. Diaz, Ed.D.

Background



Materialistic naturalism¹ 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.

Another category of people (i.e., mind-body dualists) believes there are immaterial aspects of the universe and that immaterial objects exist and are distinguishable from matter (e.g., numbers, thoughts, first-person experiences, etc.). Moreover, some of the people in this group (i.e., theists) believe that it is God² who 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 and ham & cheese on wheat. 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.”

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freedom to choose
otherwise.*”

The libertarian³ view of free will affirms that an act is genuinely free only if one can choose to do otherwise. Libertarian freedom requires that a free act not be “causally determined by factors beyond one’s control.”⁴ 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. A gun to the head doesn’t represent a free choice. More importantly, libertarians believe that the *freedom to do otherwise* is necessary for determining moral responsibility.

Reasons for Affirming Libertarian Free Will

The question addressed in this brief article is: “Do humans possess libertarian free will?” The short answer to this question is YES we do.⁵ 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 point, Dew and Gould suggest that free will is a self-evident feature of our daily experience: “It is a datum of human experience that our actions seem

to be free.”⁶ For example, in our day-to-day lives, 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, at our personal discretion, and under our own power.

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 in their freedom to select the individual sources for their literature review and the type of statistical method they will use. Scientists don’t think twice about whether they have free will when writing up the results of their research. A scientific investigator will likely never ponder whether he or she must write the following limitation into their research article: “I do not have free will, and therefore all my conclusions are determined.” Libertarian free will is a common-sense notion that seems as self-evidently true in one’s daily life as it does in scientific research.

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Second, humans have *moral obligations or duties*⁷ for which they are held accountable, and by which they become valid recipients of moral praise, blame, reward, or punishment. 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 are required to tell the truth under threat of perjury. Thus, as for scientific researchers, within the justice system, a witness is considered perfectly free to tell the truth or to lie.

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.

Christian theists believe that God has called all humanity to believe in Christ as Savior for the forgiveness of sins (1 John 3:23; Acts 10:43). For this offer to be valid, one must be free to obey or disregard such a calling. Any 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 justifiable to affirm a belief in libertarian free will.

God’s Foreknowledge and Free Will

The remainder of this article will answer two objections to the notion that God has created humans with libertarian freedom. From a Christian perspective, a common objection to free will, which I will call the *Incompatibility Argument*, asserts that human free will is incompatible with God’s foreknowledge.⁸ 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. Therefore, *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. That is, if God knows ahead of time that Joe will perform an action (A), then it logically follows that Joe will *necessarily* perform A. The argument attempts to show that God’s *foreknowledge* of A somehow *constrains* Joe from doing anything other than A.

The problem with the argument is premise 1. This premise is ambiguous because it could mean one of two things. The first possible meaning is: *Necessarily*, if God knows in advance that Joe will clap his hands at t1, then at t1 Joe will clap his hands. We will call this premise **1a**. The second possible meaning is: If God knows in advance that Joe will clap his hands at t1, then it is *necessary* that Joe clap his hands at t1. We can call premise **1b**.

The difference is subtle but critical. The Incompatibility Argument requires the truth of **1b**, but the argument only supports **1a**. In other words, **1a** tells us if God foreknows that Joe will clap his hands at t1, it follows that at t1, Joe will clap his hands. However, *it does not follow that Joe will clap his hands by necessity*. If humans possess libertarian free will, then Joe clapping his hands could fail to happen. More importantly, if it fails to occur, then it only means that God's foreknowledge would have been different.

The argument, as it stands, commits a fallacy in modal reasoning.⁹ The crucial difference is whether God's *knowing* something will happen 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; instead, 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, which is: An omnipotent God can do *anything whatsoever*. But this makes no sense. The God of Christian theism acts according to his own perfect nature. A God of goodness and justice will balance his goodness with the requirements of his justice. A God who is perfectly logical will act according to 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?

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The explanation lies in a correct understanding of God’s attributes. For example, theologian Thomas Oden defines omnipotence as “the perfect ability of God to do all things that are *consistent with the divine character*.”¹⁰ In other words, being all-powerful means that God can do *anything* as long as it is *consistent with his nature*. But there is no need for God to violate his nature because his nature is perfect.

So, what do God’s attributes 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.”¹¹ God may allow humans to freely choose between good and evil acts because he considers it a greater good to have 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, perhaps free will is a necessary characteristic of a life worth living.

Conclusion

Libertarian free will is a common-sense attribute of our lives and must be acknowledged 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. And if a person were to choose a different action in the future, then God would hold different beliefs about these future events.

The preservation of free choices, even though some may be moral evils, may mean 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 independent researcher, 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