

## SUSPENDING THE DEBATE ABOUT DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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The debate about divine sovereignty and human freedom is a series of competing attempts to reconcile two apparently conflicting components of Christian belief. Each of these attempts, or reconciliation projects, offers an account of how it can be true both that God is sovereign (omnipotent and omniscient) and that human beings have the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility. This debate continues despite longstanding objections to it. I maintain that these objections fail, but that there is another, and better, way to object to the debate. Rather than taking the line of the traditional objections by rejecting all future work on divine sovereignty and human freedom, I argue that we should suspend this debate until we solve the logically prior problem of determining what it is about human beings that justifies God in treating them as morally responsible agents.

### I. OBJECTIONS TO THE DEBATE

When an intellectual debate persists for centuries, there are likely to be thinkers who question not the standard positions defended by participants in the debate but the legitimacy of the debate itself. This has been true of the debate about divine sovereignty and human freedom (DSF debate). In this section I consider three objections to the DSF debate, two of which are long-standing objections that reject the debate outright, and one of which is a contemporary objection that views the debate as logically premature, and calls for its suspension.

1. *Rejecting the debate.* The first traditional way to reject the DSF debate may be termed the “impiety objection.” This objection has its roots in the clash between the monasteries and universities in the Middle Ages, when pious monks grew suspicious of the practice by theologians of applying logical arguments to the mysteries of divine revelation.<sup>1</sup> A classic example of the impiety objection appears in this passage about predestination and election from *The Formula of Concord*:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 62–65.

For, in addition to what has been revealed in Christ concerning this, of which we have hitherto spoken, God has still kept secret and concealed much concerning this mystery, and reserved it for His wisdom and knowledge alone, which we should not investigate, nor should we indulge our thoughts in this matter, nor draw conclusions, nor inquire curiously, but should adhere entirely to the revealed Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

The impiety objection, then, is the claim that it is offensive to God when anyone makes use of reason in an effort to go beyond what is explicitly stated in Scripture in order to secure a fuller understanding of God's truth. So if, for instance, God has revealed both that he is sovereign in salvation and that we are accountable for our response to his grace, but he has *not* revealed how these two teachings fit together, then we must not "draw conclusions" or "inquire curiously" about the matter. Such an effort would be an impious attempt to uncover what God "has still kept secret and concealed," an expression of intellectual pride.

Medieval proponents of the impiety objection were deeply concerned about the motivation of thinkers who applied their university training in logic to theological matters. For instance, monastic theologian Rupert of Deutz condemned those who dared to examine "the secrets of God in the Scriptures in a presumptuous way, motivated by curiosity and not by love," declaring that they "became heretics" and "proud" and were "not to be admitted to the sight of divinity and truth."<sup>3</sup> Clearly, then, if this impiety objection is reasonable—if it makes sense to claim that those who use reason to go beyond the explicit statements of Scripture are offending God and guilty of intellectual pride—participants in the DSF debate should repent by abandoning their debate for all future purposes.

Despite its strong emotional impact on some monastic theologians and other persons in later times, the impiety objection is not reasonable. There are two grounds for dismissing it from further consideration. The first is that this objection to the DSF debate is logically self-defeating, since it is itself the result of an application of reason to divine revelation. The Bible nowhere states the impiety objection, so an advocate of that objection must argue that it is a logical implication of what the Bible does say. Proponents of the DSF debate are free to respond by arguing that their opponents are mistaken. The second basis for dismissing the impiety objection is the fact that intellectual pride and other impious motivation is not a necessary feature of the DSF debate. Participants in the debate can be motivated by love for God and a humble desire to serve him better through gaining a greater understanding of divine sovereignty and human freedom. They can acknowledge that there always will be limits to their understanding, and that God may well choose

<sup>2</sup> *The Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921) 1081.

<sup>3</sup> Grant, *God and Reason* 63. Grant is quoting from Rupert of Deutz's *De Trinitate et operibus ejus libri XLIII* in J. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 167: 199–1828. The translated passage is taken from cols. 1084–85.

to keep some things secret. Given all this, it is reasonable to suppose that the DSF debate will please God rather than offend him.

The second traditional way to reject the DSF debate may be called the “futility objection.” Roughly, this objection is the argument that since the Bible’s teaching about divine sovereignty and human freedom constitutes a paradox, it follows that any effort to reconcile the two is an exercise in futility. So rather than pursuing the DSF debate, “we must accept the concept of paradox, believing that what we cannot square with our finite minds is somehow harmonized in the mind of God.”<sup>4</sup> Hoekema and other supporters of the futility objection see it as an expression of theological necessity, in keeping with standard Christian responses to other paradoxes, such as God’s being both one and three and Jesus as God and man. As Chesterton put it, “Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious.”<sup>5</sup>

The futility objection’s appeal to paradox may be taken in two senses. In the first sense, it is an appeal to logical contradiction. If the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom are logically contradictory, then it is impossible to reconcile them and the DSF debate is futile. In the second sense, it is an appeal to apparent contradiction. In this sense the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom are not really contradictory, but they are such that finite human beings necessarily see them as contradictory, and so cannot reconcile them. So, again, the DSF debate is futile.<sup>6</sup>

With a possible exception in St. Peter Damian (1007–1072), Christian thinkers have denied that God can make contradictory claims true, so it is safe to say that the futility objection appeals to paradox in the sense of apparent contradiction. Understood in this sense, the futility objection rejects the DSF debate as an intellectual project that exceeds human capacity. God can harmonize divine sovereignty and human freedom; human beings cannot.

Even a cursory examination of this objection reveals that it is no more reasonable than the impiety objection. Either divine sovereignty and human freedom receive an intellectual formulation or they do not. In the latter case, the terms are presented without clarification or definition, on the assumption that we will have an intuitive grasp of the meaning of each and, consequently, of their (apparent) logical inconsistency. In the former case, the terms are given clear definitions, which can then be compared to determine whether they are logically consistent with each other. Either way, the futility objection fails.

On the “intuitive grasp” approach, the most anyone can say is that some persons claim to detect a tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom, which might suggest (not establish) that the two concepts are logically contradictory. This amounts to very little, since without definitions

<sup>4</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 6.

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (repr. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) 95.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of paradox and theology, see David Basinger, “Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?” *JETS* 30 (1987) 205–13 and David M. Ciochi, “Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,” *JETS* 37 (1994) 395–412.

it is not clear just what concepts are thought to be in tension and possibly contradictory. By contrast, the “clear definitions” approach makes it evident whether the two concepts are logically consistent or contradictory. But this, too, amounts to very little, because any definitions of “divine sovereignty” and “human freedom” can be—and will be—contentious, subject to serious and continuing dispute. So it is not evident that the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom are, or necessarily appear to be, logically contradictory.

If there is something wrong about the DSF debate, it is not that it is impious or futile to engage in the debate. It is possible to question its legitimacy without rejecting in principle, as these two objections do, all future work on the relation of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

2. *Suspending the debate.* Recall that the DSF debate is a series of attempts to explain how it can be true both that God is sovereign (omnipotent and omniscient) and that human beings have the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility. This debate rests on two assumptions. The first is that *we know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility*. And the second is that *there appears to be reason to doubt that the existence and activity of a sovereign God is compatible with that sort of freedom*. The second assumption presupposes the first, so if there are grounds for rejecting the first assumption, the entire basis for the DSF debate collapses.

As I will argue in the next section of this paper, there are excellent grounds for rejecting the first assumption. We do not know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. We should, therefore, suspend the DSF debate while we work on the logically prior problem of determining what it is about human beings that justifies God in treating them as morally responsible agents.

Theologians, philosophers, scientists, and other thinkers working on this problem have generated three broad solutions to it. The first solution is not really a solution but rather a denial that the problem can be solved; it is the view that human beings are not morally responsible agents. Advocates of this view range from neuroscientists who argue that the conscious mind is an epiphenomenon of the brain’s neural activity to philosophers who maintain that the concepts of freedom and moral responsibility are incoherent.<sup>7</sup> The second solution is the view that there are facts about human beings that, while they do not permit a robust, traditional conception of moral responsibility, do justify some of our standard moral practices.<sup>8</sup> Then there is the third solution, the view that the traditional conception of human beings as morally responsible agents is fully justified.

<sup>7</sup> For some representative samples of thinkers who deny freedom and moral responsibility, see Richard Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Galen Strawson, *Freedom and Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); and Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> For thinkers who hold versions of the second solution, see Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1984); Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Saul Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

Christian thinkers should study all three solutions. They should study the first two solutions, even though they are inconsistent with Christian belief, because they raise problems that must be addressed by proponents of the third solution. And they must pay careful attention to the third solution, since it alone is consistent with Christian belief, so that the correct account of human freedom (whatever that may be) will be a version of this solution.

Participants in the DSF debate persist in working on their reconciliation projects because either (1) they are unfamiliar with the literature on freedom and responsibility, and so have no idea that there are disputes about what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, or (2) they are familiar with it, or with some of it, and they think it is obvious that one particular version of the third solution is correct. On both (1) and (2) the participants in the DSF debate retain the assumption that we know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, and with it they have a rational basis for continuing their debate.

In the next section of this paper, I argue that long-standing disputes between supporters of competing versions of the third solution—i.e. accounts of the freedom necessary for moral responsibility—have generated an intellectual stalemate. I also argue that no appeal to biblical teaching has a chance of ending that stalemate. The conclusion is that *it is not reasonable to claim that we can identify the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility*. There is, therefore, no rational basis for continuing the DSF debate. For this reason that debate should be suspended.

## II. THE STALEMATE ABOUT HUMAN FREEDOM

Taking the term “free will” to designate whatever sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, we can classify traditional supporters of moral responsibility as either compatibilists (free will is compatible with determinism) or incompatibilists (free will is not compatible with determinism).<sup>9</sup> Accounts of free will advanced by compatibilists are normally called “compatibilist,” and those advanced by incompatibilists are called “libertarian.”

Over the last thirty-five years or so there has been an enormous quantity of writing and discussion about competing free will theories. Some very fine arguments have been offered for and against all the standard versions of free will theory, compatibilist and incompatibilist. The result appears to be a stalemate, in which the arguments for one theory cannot be shown to be superior to the arguments for any other. One prominent libertarian, Peter van Inwagen, goes so far as to declare that the existence of free will is a mystery. His comments are worth quoting at length:

<sup>9</sup> The standard classification of free will theorists as either compatibilists or incompatibilists is sufficient for the argument of this paper, but contemporary philosophical work on free will and related ideas supports a much more detailed and contentious classification. For information about this, see Laura Waddell Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000); Randolph Clarke, *Libertarian Accounts of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Free will is a mystery because, although it obviously exists—of *course* we sometimes confront a choice between A and B and are, while we are trying to decide whether to do A or to do B, able to do A and able to do B—it seems to be incompatible with both determinism and indeterminism, and thus seems to be impossible. When he says that free will seems to be incompatible both with determinism and indeterminism, van Inwagen means that there are good arguments for the incompatibility of free will and determinism and good arguments for the incompatibility of free will and indeterminism, and that no one has ever identified a very plausible candidate for the flaw in any of the arguments for either class.<sup>10</sup>

Van Inwagen thinks it is obvious that free will—he means libertarian free will—exists, but is troubled by good philosophical arguments that seem to show that its existence is logically impossible. Other philosophers suppose that it is reasonable to believe in compatibilist free will, but are vexed by good arguments against compatibilism which they have been unable to refute. Any fair-minded review of the current debate between free will theorists will conclude that if, in fact, there is a correct account of free will, there appears to be no hope of achieving agreement about what it is.<sup>11</sup>

In what follows I will give brief descriptions of libertarian and compatibilist theories of free will, and will present some of the noteworthy problems each theory faces. After that, I will argue that the Bible will not help us determine which free will theory is correct.

1. *Libertarian free will.* All libertarian accounts of free will presuppose that free will is incompatible with determinism, and so they locate an element of *indeterminism* somewhere in the causal history of free actions.<sup>12</sup> For an action to be free in the sense that underwrites moral responsibility, it cannot be the causally necessary result of a set of antecedent conditions. An agent with libertarian free will has “leeway,” the genuine possibility that the choices he makes he might not have made. Besides leeway, the agent enjoys “control,” in that his free choices have their ultimate origin in himself, rather than in anything or anyone else. These choices are “up to him” in a profound sense.

Libertarianism is the preferred view of free will for many participants in the DSF debate, and this is not at all surprising. The DSF debate consists

<sup>10</sup> Peter van Inwagen, “Van Inwagen on Free Will,” in Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O’Rourke, and David Shier, eds., *Freedom and Determinism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004) 224–25.

<sup>11</sup> The persistence of disagreement among believers in free will about what counts as free will is, in the opinion of some philosophers, evidence that there is no “correct account” of free will. One philosopher who has written extensively about this is Richard Double. See his *The Non-Reality of Free Will and Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> There are many versions of libertarian free will, and no standard way to classify them. One way is to distinguish between event-causal, agent-causal, and non-causal libertarianism. The most developed account of event-causal libertarianism is found in Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); a prominent recent agent-causal account is Timothy O’Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and an example of a non-causal libertarian theory is given by Stewart Goetz, “A Non-causal Theory of Agency,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1988) 303–16.

of efforts to reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom, efforts that would not be made apart from at least the appearance of conflict between these two concepts. When divine sovereignty (omnipotence and omniscience) is interpreted as a theological form of determinism, then it comes into conflict—really, not just apparently—with libertarian free will, the view of human freedom which is incompatible with determinism. Given that many thinkers regard some sort of determinism as the default position on divine sovereignty, and a libertarian account of free will as “natural” or “obviously true,” these thinkers have solid motivation to engage in the DSF debate.

But is libertarian free will “natural” or “obviously true,” as Peter van Inwagen and others believe? If so, then the current and long-standing stalemate among free will theorists is hard to explain. In what follows I will present in summary form five lines of argument against libertarian free will.<sup>13</sup>

The first line is the *cultural limitations argument*. To many persons in the Western world, libertarian free will seems obviously true, as instructors of introductory philosophy courses can testify.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, members of societies whose traditions favor a fatalistic or deterministic approach to life seem to lack this affinity for libertarianism. It looks as if culture helps shape a person’s views of human agency, and as if there is no universal or even near-universal testimony in favor of libertarianism.

The second line of argument against libertarian free will is the *problem of the possible truth of determinism*. As a theory that logically requires the falsity of determinism, libertarianism is vulnerable to evidence and arguments for the truth of determinism. And even though determinism is currently out of favor, notably in physics, it has not been conclusively falsified. In fact, some forms of quantum theory—the principal source for the rejection of determinism—are deterministic.<sup>15</sup> So the possible truth of determinism implies the possible falsity of libertarian free will. And this threat to libertarianism is not offset by a corresponding threat to compatibilist free will, since most versions of compatibilism do not *require* the truth of determinism; instead, they simply hold that determinism and free will are compatible, so that if determinism is true, free will is not compromised.

The third line of argument is the *problem of indeterministic control*. This argument sees symmetry between determinism and indeterminism with respect to their impact on an agent’s control over his choices and actions. Libertarians object to determinism on the supposition that if a set of antecedent causal factors determines an agent’s choice, then it makes no sense to attribute to that agent control over the choice. Given those antecedent factors, the agent *could not have chosen otherwise*. Some compatibilists respond by noting that no one can control what happens indeterministically,

<sup>13</sup> For another set of anti-libertarian arguments, see Lynne Rudder Baker, “Why Christians Should Not Be Libertarians,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003) 460–78.

<sup>14</sup> I can offer my own experience—more than thirty years in the classroom—in testimony to this. When students learn about competing free will theories, they almost always identify libertarian free will as *real* free will.

<sup>15</sup> See Stephen M. Barr, “Faith and Quantum Theory,” *First Things* 171 (March 2007) 21–25.

for by definition an indeterministic event is one that is not the necessary result of anything, including libertarian freedom. Some event-causal libertarians admit there is a problem here, and opt for versions of libertarian free will which allow for less control than robust, traditional libertarianism.<sup>16</sup>

The fourth line is the *incoherence argument*. This is actually a set of related arguments, each member of which is directed against one or other version of libertarian free will. For instance, compatibilist philosophers note that some libertarians require a truly free agent to be the ultimate originator of his choices, and thus also the ultimate originator of his own character. But, say these philosophers, no one can have ultimate control over what he is; the notion of self-creation needed by these versions of libertarian free will is incoherent.

The fifth line of argument is the *problem of present luck*. On any libertarian theory an agent has “leeway” and thus might choose one way or another, given the exact circumstances at the time of choice. Suppose that at time “T” Susan, a libertarian free agent, has a choice between A and not-A. Let’s say that at “T” she chooses A. According to this line of argument, her choice of A is just a matter of luck, because she might just as well at “T” have chosen not-A. Most libertarians will say that Susan has a reason or reasons for choosing A, and having those reasons explains her choice; but they will also say that she has a reason or reasons for choosing not-A. And, say the proponents of the problem of present luck, it is just a matter of luck that she acts on the reasons for “A” instead of the reasons for “not-A.”<sup>17</sup>

2. *Compatibilist free will.* All compatibilist accounts of free will maintain that determinism is compatible with free will, but few of them require the truth of determinism. As I noted in the section on libertarian free will, most compatibilists believe that their view of free will is secure whether determinism is true or not. In other words, most compatibilists allow for the possibility that not everything that ever happens in the universe is causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. Still, they insist that there is at least one set of events—human free choices—that is causally necessitated by antecedent conditions. For all compatibilists, a free choice is the causally necessary product of a free agent’s character and circumstances.

What may be called “classical compatibilism” is the philosophical thesis that what constitutes an agent’s strongest desire at a time will determine that agent’s choice at that time.<sup>18</sup> These compatibilists claim that desire-determined choices are free and responsible choices, genuine expressions of the persons who make them. Although classical compatibilism gains some

<sup>16</sup> For an event-causal libertarian who takes this line, see Ekstrom, *Free Will*.

<sup>17</sup> A very recent, extended treatment of the luck argument is provided by Alfred R. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Classical compatibilism has a history that stretches from ancient times (the Stoics were classical compatibilists) right into the 20th century. For an important representative of classical compatibilism among Christian thinkers, see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

plausibility from the universal human experience of acting on desire, it has been subjected to powerful criticisms. Perhaps the most serious of these is the observation that classical compatibilism fails to take into account how an agent comes to have the desires on which he acts. Imagine that some manipulator—e.g. a hypnotist, a demon, or a gifted scientist—implanting a set of desires in someone without that person's knowledge or consent. Assuming that the manipulator is clever enough to make the implanted desires stronger than any desires the person already has, he will succeed in controlling his victim's choices. On any standard reading of classical compatibilism, the manipulated person is a free, responsible agent. But virtually everyone agrees that this agent is *not* free and responsible, so classical compatibilism loses any claim to plausibility.

The discrediting of classical compatibilism is a piece of philosophical progress, but it has not ended the stalemate about free will. Instead, it has compelled compatibilists to revise their accounts of freedom. What may be called "contemporary compatibilism" is the result.<sup>19</sup> All versions of this new approach to compatibilism offer lists of conditions that must be met if an agent's choice is to count as a free and responsible choice, and all these lists feature insurance against manipulation. A contemporary compatibilist will argue for something like this: "A free and responsible agent acts intelligently on beliefs and desires he has acquired consciously, free from all forms of manipulation; he is aware of his beliefs and desires and is able to reflect about how he acquired them and about what may be said for and against each one; he is a competent deliberator who chooses only after making a careful review of all relevant facts."

Even if contemporary compatibilism is successful in overcoming the criticisms that discredited classical compatibilism, it is subject to a variety of serious objections. In what follows I will present in summary form four lines of argument against compatibilist free will.

The first line is the *appeal to intuition*. Roughly, this amounts to the argument that our intuition takes causal necessity in any form as inimical to freedom and responsibility, and thus rules out compatibilism. The flip side of this is the argument that our intuition is strongly incompatibilist, and thus rules in libertarian free will as the obviously correct account of free will. The confidence of theologians, philosophers, and others who make use of this appeal to intuition is exhibited in their frequent references to libertarian free will as "genuine" or "significant." By contrast, of course, compatibilist free will is dismissed frequently as unworthy of consideration.

For libertarians who do take the time to consider carefully the claims of compatibilists, there is a second line of argument they find attractive, the *problem of shallowness*. According to this argument, compatibilism in fact

<sup>19</sup> For what is probably the most developed form of contemporary compatibilism, see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For other perspectives on current work in compatibilism, see Part IV of Kane, *Oxford Handbook*.

describes a form of freedom human beings can have, a form that does ground some ascriptions of responsibility.<sup>20</sup> Suppose that in a deterministic world there are two business partners, Joseph and Josephine. Joseph is lazy, and he devotes very little effort to his work, but Josephine works hard and over time makes a success of the business the two of them started together. Some libertarians maintain that even in a deterministic world agents who meet the requirements of contemporary compatibilism—and let's assume Joseph and Josephine meet them—are in a sense responsible for their actions. There is a morally significant distinction between Joseph and Josephine, and the stipulated truth of determinism for their world cannot erase that distinction, even though it allows only for compatibilist free will. There is a sense in which both business partners are responsible agents, one of whom deserves praise for her work, and one of whom does not. Lest anyone think this is an argument *for* compatibilism, the libertarian says the following: "In their deterministic world Joseph and Josephine are free agents of a compatibilist sort, and this confers moral responsibility on them. But this responsibility is *shallow* because it looks no deeper than the motives and character of these two people. If we look more deeply, we will see that in a deterministic world a person's character is just the unfolding of what that person was given, an unfolding that could not have turned out any differently. From a deep or ultimate perspective, Joseph and Josephine are not responsible agents."

The third and fourth lines of argument against compatibilism are variations on one theme. The third line is the *consequence argument*. Peter van Inwagen offers the following thumbnail sketch of it: "If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us."<sup>21</sup> To say that something is "not up to us" is to say that we are not responsible for it; so determinism is incompatible with free will. The closely related fourth line of argument is the *problem of remote deterministic luck*. Alfred Mele sums it up in this passage:

Compatibilism is also challenged by a kind of luck. Incompatibilists want to know how agents can be morally responsible for actions of theirs or perform them freely if, relative to their own powers of control, it is just a matter of luck that long before their birth their universe was such as to ensure that they would perform those actions. How, they want to know, is agents' *remote deterministic luck* compatible with their exercising MR freedom-level control in acting?<sup>22</sup>

Both the third and fourth lines of argument address an agent's control over his choices, and both assume that the sort of control necessary for free will is precluded by determinism.

<sup>20</sup> For the general form of the following argument, I am indebted to Smilansky. See his *Free Will and Illusion*, especially pp. 40–55.

<sup>21</sup> Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983) 56.

<sup>22</sup> Mele, *Luck* 77.

And so there it is: both libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will are subject to a number of serious objections that have not been conclusively refuted. Philosophers who work in free will theory are devoted to their favorite theories, and skilled at defending them. Alfred Mele testifies to this: “I have been immersed in this issue long enough to have learned that experienced incompatibilists—like experienced compatibilists—rarely are persuaded to climb over, or even onto, the fence.”<sup>23</sup> Because of these things, the stalemate about free will persists, and it seems highly unlikely that it will be broken.

3. *Scripture and free will.* Although the Bible contains no formal account of free will, it repeatedly asserts that human beings are morally responsible to God for the conduct of their lives. This is hardly a controversial claim, so I will make no attempt to defend it. Instead, I offer a representative sample of this biblical assertion and comment on its significance. In Revelation 16, seven angels pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God. The third bowl turns rivers into blood, and an angel remarks, “Righteous art Thou, who art and who wast, O Holy One, because Thou didst judge these things; for they poured out the blood of saints and prophets and Thou hast given them blood to drink. They deserve it” (Rev 16:5–6 NASB). It is evident that John is neither offering an account of free will nor even asserting directly that human beings are morally responsible for their deeds; he is noting the appropriateness of this particular form of divine judgment: they had shed innocent blood, and now they will be made to drink blood. But behind the angel’s verdict (“They deserve it”) is the assumption that human beings are morally responsible to God for the conduct of their lives, an assumption that, as I have said, is repeatedly asserted in the Bible. In Revelation 20, John makes this assertion in his description of the final judgment at which everyone is judged according to their deeds (vv. 12–13).

Given the clear biblical assertion of moral responsibility and the traditional use of the term “free will” to stand for whatever sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility, it follows that the Bible itself indirectly teaches that human beings have free will. But it does not follow that the Bible teaches—directly or indirectly—a particular account of free will. Biblical teaching supplies an implicit endorsement of free will, and nothing more. It is of no help in ending the long-standing philosophical stalemate about what account of free will is correct.

Typically, biblical passages that touch on questions of human agency are susceptible both to compatibilist and libertarian readings, in part because the biblical writers are not addressing the sorts of things that sustain the stalemate about free will. This is another claim that is hardly controversial, not to anyone who has taken a careful look at what the Bible actually says, so I will not try to defend it. Instead, I will offer a representative sample of a biblical passage that is neutral with respect to the competing accounts

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 157. For a technical account of the free will dispute as a “dialectical stalemate,” see John Martin Fischer, *The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994) 83.

of free will. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul is writing about Titus, who has gone to Corinth to collect the offering for the needy believers in Judea. Paul writes, "But thanks be to God, who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord" (vv. 16–17 NASB). This passage can be given a classical compatibilist reading very easily. God implants earnestness in the heart of Titus, which results in his strongest desire being to go to the Corinthians, resulting in his going to them. And it can be given a libertarian reading with equal ease. Titus goes to the Corinthians of his own accord; that is, he had libertarian leeway, so he might have either accepted or resisted the divine prompting to care about the Corinthians. In the actual case, he accepts this prompting, which induces Paul to thank God (for the prompting) and to praise Titus (for responding to it "of his own accord").

Turning from particular passages to broad biblical themes will not help end the stalemate about free will. If, for instance, someone argues the biblical teaching about God as the ultimate and sovereign source of salvation (e.g. John 6, Romans 9) implies that human beings have compatibilist free will, someone else may reply that biblical teaching about the human reception of salvation and living of the Christian life (e.g. Hebrews 6; James 1) implies that we have some form of libertarian freedom.

The upshot of all this is that *the Bible underdetermines free will theory*. No appeal to biblical teaching will settle the question of what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility; the stalemate about free will remains.

### III. AGNOSTIC AUTONOMISM

Recall that the DSF debate rests on two assumptions. The first is that *we know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility*. And the second is that *there appears to be reason to doubt that the existence and activity of a sovereign God is compatible with that sort of freedom*. The persistence of the stalemate about free will gives us excellent grounds for rejecting the first assumption. And if we reject the first assumption, we must reject the second assumption as well, and so the case for the DSF debate collapses. We should, therefore, suspend the debate while we work on the logically prior problem of determining what it is about human beings that makes them morally responsible agents. Since suspending the DSF debate requires abandoning our previously held commitments to particular accounts of free will, it leaves us needing to adopt a new, possibly provisional, stance about the freedom necessary for moral responsibility. I call that stance *agnostic autonomism*, borrowing the term from Alfred Mele.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Mele uses the term somewhat differently from the way I use it, but his concept and mine are close enough to justify applying the same term (agnostic autonomism) to both. See Mele's *Autonomous Agents: From Self-Control to Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 250–54.

1. *Description of agnostic autonomism.* An agnostic autonomist believes in moral responsibility, and so also believes in the freedom or “autonomy” human beings must have in order to be moral agents. But, in addition, he takes the stalemate about free will seriously, and consequently is agnostic as to which theory of free will is the correct one. More specifically, the agnostic autonomist affirms Proposition D: *For some of their actions human beings have the type and degree of control that is necessary and sufficient to ground ascriptions of deep moral responsibility.* Proposition D requires clarification; I will comment on four of its features.

First, Proposition D addresses some, but not all, human actions. This is in keeping with the commonly accepted view that we are morally responsible for the conduct of our lives but not always for all the acts we perform. Imagine the case of a man who drinks a beverage that, without his knowledge, has been laced with a mind-altering drug. If the man then commits a violent act due entirely to the effects of that drug, we would not regard him as morally responsible for the act.

Second, Proposition D affirms a “control” that appears to be a broader concept than “free will” understood as “whatever sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility.” This is an important contrast. Consider the case of that man who innocently drinks a drug-laced beverage. We may assume that he had free will in choosing to drink, and free will (as we are using the term) is necessary, but not sufficient, for moral responsibility. The man freely chose to drink, but he did not know about the drug and so is not morally responsible for his subsequent violent behavior. In the language of Proposition D, he lacked the relevant control. As a necessary condition of moral responsibility, free will is a component of responsibility-grounding control; it is not the whole of it.

Third, Proposition D affirms a form of control that grounds *deep* moral responsibility. The concept of moral responsibility is every bit as puzzling as free will, and it creates all sorts of intellectual disputes.<sup>25</sup> Even with a statement as brief as Proposition D, the agnostic autonomist cannot entirely avoid those disputes. By speaking of deep moral responsibility, Proposition D commits the agnostic autonomist to the existence of a type of responsibility that can justify vigorous social institutions of praise and blame, punishment and reward. Competing, more “shallow” types of responsibility—e.g. the sort of responsibility some libertarians think compatibilism allows—will not justify all those institutions. For instance, an advocate of shallow or mild moral responsibility is likely to reject the death penalty.

And fourth, Proposition D is neutral with respect to all the questions that divide participants in the free will stalemate. It offers no hints about the identity of “the type and degree of control” that grounds moral responsibility; as an expression of agnostic autonomism it could hardly do so.

<sup>25</sup> The literature addressing disputes about the concept of moral responsibility is immense; for a helpful collection of papers on the subject, see John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, eds., *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

2. *Theology and agnostic autonomism.* Proposition D is a philosophical thesis that makes no reference to God or the Bible, but its content is consistent with biblical teaching. In fact, an agnostic autonomist who is a Christian has a biblical basis both for accepting Proposition D and for supplementing it with Proposition G: *God guarantees that human beings meet the conditions that are necessary and sufficient to ground deep moral responsibility.* That basis is belief in the justice of God. It cannot be that God, as the righteous judge, should hold us responsible for the conduct of our lives unless there are facts about us that justify his judgment. Whatever those facts may be, they are both necessary and sufficient to ground ascriptions of deep moral responsibility.

In the context of a conservative theology that accepts at face value all of the Bible's assertions, the "deep moral responsibility" of Proposition D and Proposition G is nothing less than "ultimate desert"—a form of responsibility so strong that it can justify consigning a person to hell for eternity. Even thinkers who reject the Christian faith recognize ultimate desert as the limiting case for accounts of moral responsibility, and typically they mention it to dismiss it as false or incoherent. For instance, philosopher Hilary Bok says she will not present a "conception of moral responsibility strong enough to justify eternal damnation or beatitude" and insists that no coherent conception of freedom and moral responsibility could justify such things.<sup>26</sup>

Responses to deep moral responsibility as ultimate desert come in three forms. The first I have just mentioned: flat rejection. The second response is acceptance predicated on the affirmation of a particular account of free will. Let us call this "dogmatic autonomism." And the third response is acceptance predicated on the affirmation of Proposition G without appeal to any particular account of free will. This, of course, is the response of the agnostic autonomist. Only the second and third responses are legitimate options for Christians who take the Bible seriously.

Consider a theologian who is a dogmatic autonomist. He believes in deep moral responsibility as ultimate desert and believes he knows what sort of freedom is necessary for that moral responsibility. Furthermore, he can give a careful articulation of that "sort of freedom," whether he supposes it to be libertarian or compatibilist. There is something else that may well be true about him: he may find himself uneasy about the doctrine of hell. This is common enough, but it is surprising for a sincere dogmatic autonomist. Why? Because, besides his belief that God through Christ offers eternal salvation, the dogmatic autonomist believes that he knows what it is about human beings that justifies God in consigning them to hell. At least on intellectual grounds, the theologian who is a sincere dogmatic autonomist should not be uneasy about his belief in hell.

Now consider a theologian who is an agnostic autonomist. He believes in deep moral responsibility as ultimate desert, but he believes that he does

<sup>26</sup> Hilary Bok, *Freedom and Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 9.

*not* know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. He is impressed by the philosophical stalemate about free will, and he finds the concept of moral responsibility to be perplexing. As implications of his faith, he accepts both Proposition D and Proposition G, believing that God knows what it is about human beings that justifies treating them as moral agents who deserve an eternal hell. There is something else that may be true about him: he may find himself uneasy about the doctrine of hell. Again, this is common enough, but it is *not* surprising for an agnostic autonomist. Why? Because as far as he can tell on intellectual grounds, deep moral responsibility as ultimate desert is highly unlikely. He has no arguments to offer skeptics like Hilary Bok; he is not able to explain how God could ever be just in sending anyone to an eternal hell. As an agnostic autonomist, he cannot appeal to a particular account of free will to sustain even a modest form of moral responsibility, much less the deep moral responsibility of Proposition D and Proposition G. Given the limits of his intellectual position, the theologian who is an agnostic autonomist may well feel uneasy about his belief in hell.

The contrast between these two theologians is instructive. It shows us that agnostic autonomism makes much better sense than dogmatic autonomism in explaining the experience of uneasiness about the doctrine of hell. This is a point in favor of agnostic autonomism, the stance of those who advocate suspending the DSF debate in which dogmatic autonomists frequently participate. And this contrast also gives us reason to doubt the first assumption of the DSF debate, namely, that we know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. For if we did know this, why would we be uneasy (intellectually) about the doctrine of hell? Dogmatic autonomists say they have this knowledge of free will, but they sometimes are uneasy about the doctrine of hell.

There is a possible rejoinder by the dogmatic autonomists, and it, too, is instructive. Again consider our theologian who is a dogmatic autonomist and who is uneasy about the doctrine of hell. If he modifies my original description of dogmatic autonomism, this theologian may say that we *do know* what sort of freedom is necessary for ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility among human beings, but that we *do not know*—at least not fully—what it is about us that grounds ascriptions of deep moral responsibility, the “ultimate desert” implied by the doctrine of hell. Therefore, he says, it makes sense that even dogmatic autonomists can be uneasy about this most difficult of Christian beliefs.

Why is this instructive? It shows us that the dogmatic autonomists have a dilemma. Either (1) they claim to know only what sort of freedom is necessary for ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility or (2) they claim to know whatever it is about human beings that grounds ascriptions of deep moral responsibility and thereby justifies hell. If they opt for (1), they lose much of the motivation for the DSF debate. Participants in the debate worry about whether the existence of a sovereign (omnipotent and omniscient) God is compatible with human beings having the sort of freedom that would justify

this God in holding them morally responsible for their lives.<sup>27</sup> And, of course, God's holding them responsible is clearly the paradigm of *deep* moral responsibility. If they opt for (2), dogmatic autonomists retain the problem of explaining the uneasiness some of them feel about the doctrine of hell.

Agnostic autonomism appears to be the better choice for a stance about freedom and moral responsibility. It is a rational response to the philosophical stalemate about free will, and it makes good sense of our intellectual discomfort with the doctrine of hell. But it is only a stance, not a project. It is useful as a stance—an intellectual posture—to take while engaging in an attempt to solve the problem that is logically prior to the DSF debate, namely, the problem of determining what it is about human beings that justifies God in holding them morally responsible for the conduct of their lives.

#### IV. ATTEMPTING TO END THE STALEMATE

Perhaps the place to begin in working on this problem is to distinguish two senses of “ending the stalemate” about free will. In the first sense, we achieve a consensus in favor of one of the two species of free will theory (libertarian and compatibilist). In this first sense, “ending the stalemate” will not be sufficient to justify our resuming the DSF debate. Why? Because all it will give us is the sort of freedom that is necessary for *ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility*. Participants in the DSF debate need to know what is necessary and sufficient for *deep moral responsibility*. In the second sense, then, “ending the stalemate” is the creation of a consensus about the conditions for deep moral responsibility, which will be a specification of the “control” affirmed by Proposition D.

A consensus about the conditions for deep moral responsibility must feature a list of those conditions. Let us call this an “R-List” (“R” for responsibility). R-Lists figure prominently in the work of philosophers, especially those who are compatibilists. Although not a compatibilist himself, Richard Double has developed a compatibilist R-List of five conditions: self-knowledge, reasonability, intelligence, efficacy, and unity.<sup>28</sup> A free and responsible agent will meet all five conditions; for instance, he will have the first, self-knowledge—a good grasp of his beliefs, desires, and other mental states—so that he will be free of ignorance and self-deception when making his choices. Each of the conditions makes some contribution to the case for attributing moral responsibility to an agent.

An agnostic autonomist who wishes to resume the DSF debate must work to develop an R-List that includes more than the sorts of conditions Double places on his list. This is because a Christian thinker (in this case our agnostic autonomist) believes that deep moral responsibility is only possible in the real world, that is, the world in which every moral agent is ultimately accountable

<sup>27</sup> This worry is related to, but distinct from, the philosophical dispute about whether moral responsibility is compatible with determinism. That dispute requires neither a reference to God nor a commitment to deep moral responsibility.

<sup>28</sup> Double, *Non-Reality of Free Will* 48–49.

to God. So the correct R-List will contain more epistemic conditions than Double's requirement that responsible agents have self-knowledge. It will include, for instance, at least tacit knowledge of God's existence (Romans 1) and some knowledge of God's moral law (Romans 2). In other words, the agnostic autonomist wants an R-List that requires us to know *to whom* and *for what* we are deeply responsible. And given the complexity of any discussion of moral responsibility, the correct R-List is likely to contain a good number of additional conditions.

As he develops his R-List, the agnostic autonomist should test each of its components, and the list itself, in a variety of ways. These include tests for logical coherence, consistency with biblical teaching, and agreement with common moral intuitions. And finally, he should submit his R-List to others for their critical review. If a number of agnostic autonomists worked on this project, it is possible that in time they would have a consensus about the conditions for deep moral responsibility.

If such a consensus were achieved, agnostic autonomists would thereby shed their agnosticism and become dogmatic autonomists, prepared to resume the DSF debate. They would then ask whether anything about the sovereignty (omnipotence and omniscience) of God appears to rule out human beings meeting the conditions for deep moral responsibility. If the answer is in the affirmative, they would then undertake projects to reconcile these two lines of Christian belief. Disputing the merits of these reconciliation projects would constitute the new DSF debate.

##### V. AN APPEAL TO DOGMATIC AUTONOMISTS

Most Christian thinkers with conservative theological views are dogmatic autonomists who are unlikely to be impressed by the philosophical stalemate about free will. They are likely to remain satisfied with their favorite libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will, and will refuse to abandon them when told that doing so is a prerequisite for gaining a fuller understanding of deep moral responsibility. The libertarians among them will see libertarianism as naturally or obviously true, and many of the compatibilists will insist that compatibilism is a logical implication of the sovereignty of God. In what follows I argue that even dogmatic autonomists should suspend the DSF debate to work on the logically prior problem of determining what it is about human beings that justifies God holding them morally responsible for the conduct of their lives. I will show that dogmatic autonomists should join agnostic autonomists in the search for the conditions that ground deep moral responsibility.

Suppose that some form of libertarian freedom is the correct account of free will (the freedom necessary for moral responsibility). And suppose further that God refrains from determining what our choices shall be. Does it follow that we have deep moral responsibility for the conduct of our lives, and that God is justified in consigning us to an eternal hell? No. The fact that God does not control our choices does not guarantee that we have control over them, much less the sort of control that would make us deeply responsible for

them. All a particular libertarian account of free will gives us is a necessary condition for ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility. To justify hell, we will need an R-List that supplements the “libertarian free will condition” with a number of additional conditions that are necessary and jointly sufficient to ground ascriptions of deep moral responsibility. Therefore, dogmatic autonomists who are libertarians should suspend their participation in the DSF debate, and join agnostic autonomists in the search for a full account of the conditions for deep moral responsibility.

Suppose instead that some form of compatibilist freedom is the correct account of free will. In that case, theological determinists can assert both that God determines all things, including our choices, and that we have free will. But given these beliefs, can we conclude that human beings have deep moral responsibility and are thereby fit candidates for an eternal hell? No. Simply to assert that a deterministic version of divine sovereignty is compatible with human freedom fails to supply us with a full account of the conditions for deep moral responsibility. We cannot turn to classical compatibilism, since it is no longer philosophically tenable, and we will find that contemporary versions of compatibilism are “works in progress” that continue to be viewed with skepticism by those who doubt that any form of compatibilism could ever give us more than a shallow form of moral responsibility. So what compatibilists need is an R-List that is free from the flaws of classical compatibilism and will not easily be overturned by libertarian charges of shallowness. Since, then, they are not yet prepared to explain what it is about human beings that justifies God in holding them deeply responsible, dogmatic autonomists who are compatibilists should suspend their participation in the DSF debate. They may then join libertarians and agnostic autonomists in an effort to provide a full account of the conditions for deep moral responsibility.

## V. CONCLUSION

The long-standing debate about divine sovereignty and human freedom rests on the assumption that we know what sort of freedom is necessary for moral responsibility. A careful consideration of the philosophical stalemate about free will and the Bible’s underdetermination of free will theory should make us reject that assumption and lead us to suspend the debate. We thereby become agnostic autonomists, and proceed to engage in a search for the conditions that ground not only ordinary ascriptions of moral responsibility, but the deep moral responsibility that justifies consigning human beings to hell. And, as I have argued, even if we remain dogmatic autonomists we have good reasons to suspend the debate and join the agnostic autonomists in their search.

However protracted our search, we may never have a full account of the conditions for deep moral responsibility. We can, all the same, rest confident that God knows those conditions. Because he knows them and is loving and just, we can affirm Proposition G: *God guarantees that human beings meet the conditions that are necessary and sufficient to ground deep moral responsibility.*