

ABILITY AND DESIRE:
REFRAMING DEBATES SURROUNDING
FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Theological history is full of discussion and debate about the nature and limits of human freedom and its relationship to such matters as the origin of sin, the helplessness of sinners, and moral responsibility. This article suggests a straightforward way to conceptualize critical ideas involved, and their interrelationships, that can shed helpful light on the matters at stake in these historical and contemporary debates, and can resolve some of the related issues, in order to refocus the dialogue between the broadly Arminian and Calvinist schools of theological thought on the essential differences between them.¹

Perhaps the doctrine that most evidently distinguishes an Arminian theological framework from a Calvinist framework can be found in the *ordo salutis*—specifically in the question of whether faith precedes or follows regeneration. Here, we avoid the difficulties of nuanced definitions and subtle distinctions. Instead, we have a clear-cut question regarding which of two conditions precedes, and precipitates, the other. In an Arminian framework, some combination of natural humanity and common grace provides sufficient conditions for faith, upon which regeneration is conditioned. In a Calvinist understanding, on the other hand, natural humanity is fundamentally depraved so as to certainly preclude genuine faith apart from a prior, special, and personal work of regenerating grace. When faced with the question of the likelihood of unregenerate human sinners embracing the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, traditional Arminian theology says that some will and some will not; Calvinist theology claims that certainly none will.

The question of personal freedom is commonly seen as closely related to this matter in the *ordo salutis*. In response to the question of whether natural humans are *able* to repent and believe the gospel prior to regeneration, or whether they are *free* to do so, Arminians have commonly responded affirmatively and Calvinists often negatively. So it is that many in both

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¹ In terms of the contemporary debate in philosophical, as well as theological, circles, Arminian and Calvinist perspectives roughly parallel those of non-compatibilist (or libertarian) and compatibilist positions, excepting those Calvinist positions that simply deny that relevant categories of freedom (in spiritual matters) are true of fallen humans. I will use these different categories somewhat interchangeably in this article.

schools have characterized the Calvinist understanding of natural humanity as “not free” in this way. It is my thesis here that this is an unnecessary inference—that the typically Arminian response that unregenerate sinners are free to respond to the gospel is correct, even though I hold to a clearly Calvinistic theological framework as reflected by, among other things, an *ordo salutis* in which regeneration necessarily precedes faith. How this is so should become evident.

The first several sections will explain concepts employed and consider the language of biblical texts that seem to discredit my thesis. The last two sections provide a sampling of theological issues and debates from the history of Christian theology and philosophy where the distinctions offered here might provide an avenue for improvement.

I. DEFINING FREEDOM

To provide for a clear discussion, we need to begin by defining and explaining terms. In the simplest of expressions, I believe that what we mean when we say that one is free is that *one can do what one wants*.² This is to say that when one acts, one does so apart from any external compulsion. Without constraints that compel action inconsistent (or potentially inconsistent) with one’s own personal motives, one’s choices and actions are free.³

There are, of course, many limits upon human freedom.⁴ Still, this does not keep us from saying that we are, to a meaningful degree, and in many real senses, free. As such, we can build on the definition above, by saying that we are free *to the extent that* we can do what we want. Of course, the critical issue in the debate under consideration is whether we are free with regard to choices with spiritual implications. These include such monumental choices as: seeking God or independence from him, obeying or disobeying God, pursuing (or not) God’s direction for one’s life, responding in one way or another to a comprehensible presentation of the gospel. I suggest that humans are generally free in such choices, in the natural sense of freedom. Humans can freely choose whether to turn to God, or away from him.

² I believe this reflects the normal use of language, and has been embraced in more technical theological discussion as well. For example, Jonathan Edwards suggests the same definition (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1: *Freedom of the Will* [ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale, 1957] 163).

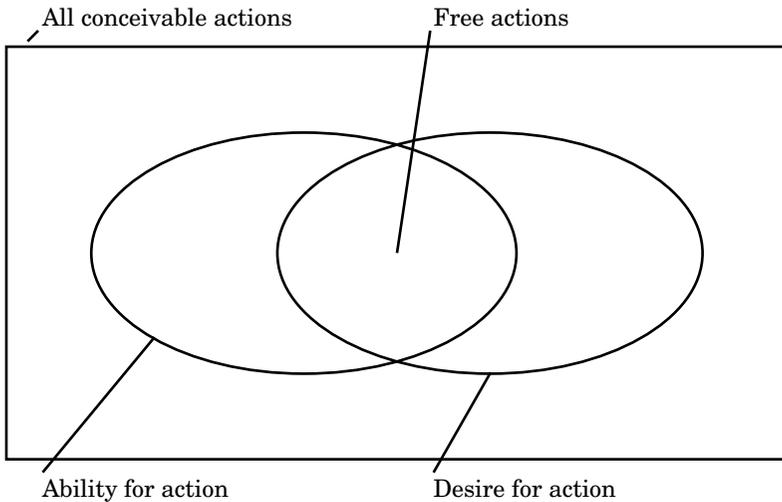
³ Another way freedom is often described is to say that one is free if one could do otherwise than one actually does. This is really a derivative of the more basic definition I have offered.

⁴ For instance, I cannot fly without assistance, even if I want to; thus, we would say, I am not free to fly. Such limits may be attributable to our nature and design as creatures (such as lacking the ability to fly), or due to external limits on our choices. A secure prison cell essentially ensures that a prisoner is not free to depart from it. Inherent consequences also place certain limits upon our freedom. I am free to commit a crime as long as I have the means to carry it out. But I am not free to do so without incurring legal guilt, and likely not without reaping penal consequences; thus I may be free to carry out a certain action, but my (free) consideration of it will take into account related consequences outside my control.

II. THE NATURE OF FREEDOM

Understanding that a free person can do what he wants, we can conclude that one's free choices reflect one's preferences. Thus there are two basic factors in free choices: ability and desire (as expressed in preferences). One is free to choose where one has the *ability* to act; however, within the parameters of one's abilities, one *will* choose only according to one's desires. For an action to be undertaken freely, both the ability and the desire must be present on the part of the actor. Thus in a criminal trial, the prosecutor generally needs to demonstrate both that the accused had the ability to commit the crime (i.e. necessary opportunity and means were available, and there is no alibi inconsistent with the circumstances of the crime) and that he had the motive (or desire) to do so. A responsible jury will not rightly conclude that an accused party is guilty unless both elements are proven.

The fact that free choices reflect personal desire (or intent) is critical in moral and legal guilt. This reflects the understanding that desires are the decisive reason behind free choices. Furthermore, these desires are not arbitrary; they reflect a real disposition of the person that would be reasonably likely to drive similar choices should similar circumstances arise in the future.⁵



The diagram above illustrates the relationship between ability, desire, and freedom. Out of all conceivable actions, we are able to perform only some. There is also only a subset of conceivable actions that we want to do. The two subsets overlap to some degree. As is illustrated, there are some conceivable actions that we have neither the desire nor the ability to do.⁶ There

⁵ Both personally and externally.

⁶ For example, swallowing a live adult crocodile whole.

are other things that we want to do, but are unable to do.⁷ Some things that we have the ability to do, we would not want to do.⁸ The intersection of the two circles in the diagram defines the actions that a person has both the desire and the ability to do. All free actions are contained within this subset of conceivable actions.⁹ We are free to act anywhere within the scope of our abilities (i.e. we can do so); however, we *will* act freely only within the scope of our desires.

Looking again to the disagreement over unregenerate humans doing the things of God or responding to the gospel with faith, this framework clarifies the case that must be made. The Arminian framework requires that both the ability and the desire to respond are present in at least some fallen humans, and potentially in any. The Calvinist position requires that at least one of the two be certainly absent. The debate throughout the history of the Church has tended to focus on the question of ability. In fact, the language of ability has been frequently employed, even when the *desire* of fallen humanity is in view. This has resulted from the fact that the two matters have not been clearly distinguished, due in part to common conventions of language that were not adequately evaluated. It is my contention that the primary focus of these theological debates should be on human desire rather than ability. We will return to this issue after a brief foray into ethical theory and an assessment of the human predicament.

III. FREEDOM AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

Virtually all moral theories, including those embraced by evangelicals, acknowledge that one is morally responsible to act only within the realm of one's ability.¹⁰ One does not incur moral guilt for failing to do what is not within one's ability, nor for performing actions beyond one's ability to avoid. In general, this is a sound moral principle, difficult to discredit, at least with regard to human ethical theory. It is sometimes stated in the corollary form as "ought implies can." The idea is that if we are truly morally obligated to perform an action, it must then be within our ability to act. If it were not, we would not be under moral obligation to do it.

⁷ For example, flying without external assistance.

⁸ For example, drinking hydrochloric acid.

⁹ The overlapping domain does, however, represent a larger set of actions than those we actually do—it includes everything that we *might* do freely. One may be compelled to do something that one has the ability, but not the desire, to do (thus falling within the domain of ability, but outside the domain of desire). Within the realm of possible free actions (the overlapping domain), the actual course of events will be directed by one's relative desires. I may want to visit a friend in Boston for an evening. I may also have interest in visiting a friend in Los Angeles the same evening. Here I encounter a dilemma. While I could visit either, I *cannot* visit both. I will need to choose between the two, based on which I desire more strongly. Alternately, there may also be a limitation in my *desire* for two compatible options. I may have an interest in listening to two different kinds of music. While I could do both (provided I have two stereos), I probably do not want to do both at the same time. Again, I will choose based on the greater desire, since I find doing both less satisfying than doing only one.

¹⁰ For example, John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) 19, 22.

Given this common and credible ethical theory, those who deny that humans are free (in relevant areas) are quite vulnerable to criticism, if they also maintain that humans are, at the same time, morally responsible for their failure to act. Such would generally be the case if one contends that humans lack the ability to act according to God's commandments. It is not surprising, then, that those adopting such positions, as Calvinists have often done, are commonly challenged at this point. Similarly, if sinners lack the capability to respond to God's grace offered in Christ, it is argued that God would be unreasonable for holding them accountable for rejecting the gospel. I find these to be credible arguments against such a position that denies human freedom in spiritual areas, since failure to obey or repent would not necessarily reflect a lack of desire to do so. The most that can be credibly argued, if humans are unable to obey God, is that they are guilty for not wanting to, even though they could not, even if they did want to.

An argument that claims that sinners are not free (i.e. are unable) to repent is to say that they could not, even if they wanted to. I do not believe this is what is normally intended in such a position, but if it is not, then the terminology misses the point. Commonly, what is meant is that a person is thoroughly wicked, and will not (rather than cannot) submit to God. But if one's failure to submit is due to one's desire, rather than one's ability, then the language of freedom and inability is not the right terminology. We do not say that one is not free in regard to a matter if the reason one fails to do it is simply and precisely because one does not want to do so.

The biblical case for human guilt before God hardly needs to be made. There is scarcely a more consistent message in Scripture. A framework that finds no responsibility without ability suggests that if humans ought to be different, then they are able to be different. While Arminians will wholeheartedly embrace this ethical framework, it does not complete their case with regard to the *ordo salutis* and the status of fallen humanity. It only means that the prospect of natural humans responding to God is not ruled out on the basis of ability. But both ability and desire need to be proven. While "ought" implies "can," "can" does not imply "will" or even "might." There are many things that humans can do that they will not. By agreeing that humans have the ability to respond to God, we have simply moved the focus of the discussion to human desire.

IV. THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

In light of the biblical record, I believe we can conclude that, since the fall, humans are fundamentally sinful. Humans are, at the deepest levels of their natural selves, haters of God as God, rather than lovers of him.¹¹

¹¹ The outworkings of this truth may be subtle. We may choose to act consistently with God's commands in certain ways, though it may be due to external influences, or simply because we agree with a particular command. Even so, we still reserve the right to sit in judgment over it, and over all his other commands as well.

Furthermore, by our sin, we have lost forever the opportunity to be truly righteous. There is no way to make up for our guilt.¹² In this, no natural human is free. We are not free to be right before God. We lack the ability to make ourselves so. What is more, we are not free to escape from God's terms and governance. We are inescapably accountable to him.

Understood in this light, the condition of natural, sinful human beings is truly desperate. In order to be restored to righteousness and godly living for eternity, both ability and desire to do so are necessary. Sinful humans lack both—and each of these basic lacks must be addressed. The good news of the gospel is that we can return to the abundant life God intended—at the cost of our sin and self-rule. Sinners who hear the gospel can be saved if they are willing. Calvinists ought to be able to embrace this glorious truth as enthusiastically as Arminians. This, however, does not alter the second critical problem: while sinners can be saved, they are not willing, I believe the Scriptures teach, until and unless God first does the work of regeneration. Repentance is a cost natural sinners are unwilling to pay. The reason that sinners do not turn and submit to the gospel of Christ prior to regeneration is not because they are not free to do so. It is precisely because they are free to follow their own sinful wills. Once made a new creature, however, there is a free and genuine human response to the gospel on the part of all who are saved in Christ. In this, God receives all the glory, having provided the ability and the desire for the salvation of his redeemed.¹³ Nothing in this position requires us to say that natural, sinful humans are unable to respond to grace in the gospel, only that they are unwilling. As such, this understanding is consistent with holding sinners guilty for their wicked stubbornness.

V. BIBLICAL AND EVERYDAY LANGUAGE OF ABILITY AND INABILITY

If sinful humans have the ability to be saved by repenting and trusting Christ in response to the gospel, the problem is not that the abilities of sinners are weak, but that their desires are wicked. It is not that they cannot respond to Christ, but that they will not. This clearly raises a question about many biblical texts that use language of inability, suggesting that sinners

¹² Everything we have (ourselves, our life, our abilities, etc.) is given to us by God, and we owe him an accounting for what we do with it all. Like an employer who has given a cash advance for a business trip who requires an accounting for the business use of all the funds given, so we owe God an accounting for all he has given to us. The essence of sin is that we have not used everything as God intended. We have, in many ways, squandered his gifts, and have nothing suitable to show for it. We stand guilty before him. But our situation is worse yet. As prodigals, we have no way to make up for our loss. Even setting aside any notion of punitive assessment, we have nothing with which to make up even what we have squandered. Since everything we have comes from God, and is given for good purposes (not for paying off prior obligations), we cannot use anything we have to make up for our existing debt without incurring new debt.

¹³ Ability is provided in the gospel and desire by regeneration (i.e. the new heart of Ezek 36:26; the new birth of John 3; the new creation in 2 Cor 5:17).

lack the ability to turn to Christ, to obey God, and so on.¹⁴ A clear example is John 6:65 where Jesus says that “no one can¹⁵ come to me, unless it has been granted him from the Father.” What are we to make of the Scriptures that use the language of human inability in this way? Calvinists have commonly interpreted such texts in the plain sense of inability. While I have taken a different path, I believe nonetheless that such texts do undermine the Arminian position that the prospect of genuine faith is a possibility prior to regeneration. In short, my understanding of many such texts is that “cannot” essentially means “certainly will not.”¹⁶ This, I hope to demonstrate, is a convention of both biblical and everyday language.

It is not uncommon to use the language of inability as a sort of hyperbole in expressions that speak not of ability, but of desire. Consider texts that state such things as that God cannot lie, that it is impossible for God to lie, or that he cannot deny himself.¹⁷ We are told in many other places in Scripture that God can do anything; nothing is too hard for him.¹⁸ Clearly, the statement that God cannot lie (or that he could not do any particular thing) is not a reference to a limitation in his capability to act. Scripture is not suggesting that it is “too hard” for him. If we were to respond to the statement “God cannot lie” by asking “Really? Not even if he wanted to?” we would quickly uncover the real proposition of the text. The point is clearly that God would not want to. In some sense, he *could* not *want* to. It is unthinkable. His character is pure. This, however, is clearly a different sense of “could” than the normal usage. “Would” has been made into “could” for effect. The point here is that there is no possibility that God will, for instance, act wickedly—even though he is absolutely free.¹⁹ The reason is plain with the model presented here. God does not have both of the prerequisites to do so freely—ability and desire. While he surely has the ability, he certainly lacks the desire. That being so, God’s acting wickedly is an impossible outcome.

We find the same thing in our ordinary language as well. Consider the folk tale we have heard about George Washington’s truthfulness in admitting his guilt by saying “Father, I cannot tell a lie; I chopped down your cherry tree.” The truth of the tale is irrelevant here. We know the point the story is intended to make. It is not meant to suggest in any sense that Washington was weak, or lacked some functional capability that other children have. He was not saying, “I would like to lie, but I lack the ability to do so.” It is a story about the founder’s strength of character, not his weakness of ability.

¹⁴ These are generally among the texts that Calvinists have used to argue against Arminian positions.

¹⁵ οὐδείς δύναται; cf. 6:44.

¹⁶ I say many, as I do not mean all texts that speak of human inability, as noted later.

¹⁷ ὁ ἀψευδὴς θεὸς in Titus 1:2; διὰ δύο πραγμάτων ἀμεταθέτων (ἐν οἷς ἀδύνατον ψεύσασθαι τ[ὸ]ν θεόν in Heb 6:18; ἑαυτὸν οὐ δύναται in 2 Tim 2:13.

¹⁸ For example, Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Jer 32:17; Matt 19:26, cf. Mark 10:27, Luke 1:37, 18:27.

¹⁹ By absolute freedom, I meant that there are no limits on his freedom, or ability. God can do anything he wants, though there are many things that he clearly does not, and never will, want to do.

Though he could lie, he would not. It is a statement positive in nature, not negative, though it employs negative language to make the point more dramatically. We frequently employ the same convention of language in ordinary discourse. Consider the common statement “I just couldn’t do _____” where the action in question might mean speaking to a certain person, standing up in front of a crowd, deceiving a friend, or any number of things. The statement may indicate either a weakness or strength of character.²⁰ Either way it is a statement about character and desire, not ability in the strict sense. It is merely a convention of language.

Just as a statement that God is unable to lie points to the certainty that his character will not do so, I believe that Jesus’ statement that natural sinners cannot come to him is a statement about the fundamental nature of sin at the core of fallen humanity. He is not suggesting that sinners may want to turn to him, but be frustrated by their inability (which would be a reason simply to pity them). He is making a statement about their desires (and so they are rightly held guilty). They will not turn because their hearts are wicked. Unless God changes their hearts, they will never repent and believe. The point here is that such an interpretation of texts addressing human ability is entirely consistent with the normal range of usage in human language. It is also clearly a biblical usage, as we must at least understand references to God’s “inability” in this manner.

We know that there are many limits to human ability and speak of them ourselves, yet we use the language of inability to speak both of literal inability, and as a means of speaking to character and desire in hyperbole. Biblical language does the same thing. If we were to look at all individual texts that speak of human inability, we would find some in each category.²¹ Most would be clear as to which category they fall into. One mechanism to help us discern which usage is intended is simply to ask “Really? Not even if _____ wanted to?” In most cases, the intention of the text would be evident with the application of this simple, but revealing, test. Others would require more rigorous exegesis.²²

²⁰ For example, “I lack the courage to do the thing in question” or “I will not violate my conscience or my love a friend.”

²¹ I should make it clear that I do not understand all texts that speak of human inability as a reference to desire in hyperbole. Many are intended at face value (still consistent with normal language conventions). For example, Jesus tells his disciples “apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NASB). Apart from the need to understand exactly what Jesus means by “nothing” (He may mean, for example, that they cannot do anything of real value apart from him; he probably does not mean that they are not able to breathe, sin, or die even though on one level, all of these things are true), I believe he means literally what he says when he says that they *can* not. That does not mean they can do nothing, only that they can do nothing *apart from him*. With him, they can do much, which is quite his point in the context. On my own, I cannot travel 500 miles in a day, but driving a vehicle I have done it several times. It is within my ability if I employ resources at my disposal. This is Jesus’ point in John 15. He is urging his disciples to remain in him so that they would be able to bear much lasting fruit. (Thus Phil 4:13 is a corollary to John 15:5: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”) This is his exhortation in pointing out their very real inability to do so apart from him.

²² Clearly, *all* references to divine inability are employing the hyperbole of language to speak to the purity and soundness of God’s character, not to limits in his strength or functional capabilities.

In cases where we examine language under a microscope in the context of theological analysis and insist that “cannot” always and unequivocally means exactly “cannot” in the strict sense of inability, we have misunderstood the breadth of meaning in this common terminology.²³ In doing so, we cloud the debate concerning human freedom and further adopt a position that suggests that not everything is possible, even with God. Here we diminish the textual testimony to God’s character in two respects. We have undermined our understanding of omnipotence and failed to see that these texts are intended as a positive expression of the purity of his character. It is my claim here that texts that speak of human inability to respond to God (or similar propositions) are statements about the condition of human character and desire. Fallen humans are so *fundamentally* depraved—persistently opposed to the reign of God—that they will not respond in genuine faith prior to divine regeneration. This is not a matter of ability, but of desire; free, capable agents certainly will not freely do that which they are not inclined to do.

VI. FREEDOM AS A LENS

Understanding the nature of ability (or freedom) and desire in this way, we can see freedom as a sort of lens upon the character of a person. What one chooses freely reflects (at least in some important way) the person’s desires, which are essentially an expression of character. Such desires certainly are important in determining any credit or blame that ought to be assigned to an individual. Furthermore, the choices and actions of one person with (for whatever reason) relatively limited freedom may not as accurately reflect his or her character as another who enjoys greater relative freedom. To the extent that either person is free, the choices made are a lens into the person’s character, which may be wicked or godly (or more truly, somewhere along the spectrum between the two). Any moral judgment appropriate to either has more to do with the person’s character than with freedom. Freedom simply provides a category that determines how accurately a person’s choices reflect his or her character. Any moral guilt or praise is properly assigned to the character. As creatures with limited perspective, we are not able to render accurate judgment on anyone. Certainly God can know the true character of a person, and the sense in which one’s choices reflect one’s character. Our confidence in a just divine judgment depends on this truth.

That freedom simply provides a lens into a person’s character that God can otherwise determine, and that we cannot, is evident in much of Scripture. The challenging heart statements of Jesus in Matthew 5 provide an illustration of this. One’s actions may be limited by any number of factors, but what is in the heart, expressed or not, is the real matter for which we stand guilty before God. Likewise, he announces to his disciples that the meager

²³ I believe Calvinists have often gone awry at this point, and in doing so have undermined the credibility of otherwise sound arguments and put them in an unnecessarily defensive position in matters such as personal responsibility.

offering of a poor widow was a reflection of greater generosity than existed in the hearts of others who gave much more.²⁴ The greater wealth of others was an example of greater freedom. Her circumstantially limited freedom did not change the fact that she was the more generous person. Clearly Jesus implies that she is judged according to that generosity, despite the limit upon her freedom to express it.

While the story of the widow's mite contemplates moral strength, the same principle applies in the matter of moral guilt. In Rom 7:7–12, Paul explains how law provides a sort of freedom for already sinful persons to sin. One who is inclined to rebel has no opportunity to do so apart from law. In this way, law is a lens upon sinful character. It was already wickedly rebellious, but lacked opportunity to demonstrate its character. Even so, God's judgment is not based simply on the sinfulness of a heart that God knows apart from law, for "sin is not imputed when there is no law."²⁵ Whether based on the sin of Adam (in a traditional, orthodox understanding of original sin) or the breaking of other law available to an individual, God's judgment appears to require the freedom and legal indictment that law provides, not simply on the fact that God knows an individual would sin if given the opportunity. Still, we must recognize that no one is guilty because he or she is free. One's guilt is attributable to one's wicked character. Freedom simply provides an opportunity for that wickedness to be demonstrated.

VII. APPLICATION TO THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

1. *Human responsibility.* Having outlined this framework for understanding the language of freedom, there are potentially several helpful theological applications. The first is the question of human responsibility. This model of human freedom provides a clear way to understand how humans can reasonably be understood to be responsible for sin, even though they will certainly sin. The certainty does not stem from an inability to do otherwise, but from the fundamentally sinful desires of the natural human heart. The critical indictment of Scripture is not that humans are weak, but that they are wicked. I have attempted to make this point in the reasoning offered above. The essential problem is not that sinners cannot do what they must, but that they will not do what they can. As such, they are rightly held guilty for their sin.

2. *The origin of sin.* Secondly, a distinction between ability and desire can provide some assistance in the difficult matter of the origin of sin. Too often, those who emphasize freedom speak of it as a cause of human actions;²⁶ however, it is essential to bear in mind that freedom is not properly the cause of anything. Freedom simply allows one to act as one wishes. Within the parameters of one's freedom (i.e. one's abilities), one's desires will direct one's actions.²⁷ Freedom allows certain courses of actions to be taken, but

²⁴ Mark 12:41–44.

²⁵ Rom 5:13.

²⁶ For example, "Certain persons did something in particular *because* they are free to do so."

²⁷ Alternately, we could say, one's desires are the "cause" of, or reason for one's actions.

does not cause or explain any of them.²⁸ The concept of freedom simply describes a condition within which actions are taken as directed by a person's desires.²⁹ Arguing, then, that people do certain things because they are free to do so misses the point and clouds the discussion considerably. There is a popular argument that the reason that there is sin in the world is that God endowed humans with freedom. Its corollary is that freedom could not exist without sin. Freedom does support the fact that sin was a possibility, but it does nothing to explain why that possibility was embraced. While this thesis does not provide a positive explanation for the human fall into sin, it does show us that our focus must be on the intent, nature, or desire of the heart of original humanity, rather than on its freedom.³⁰ The existence of freedom, in its natural sense, offers nothing to answer the question in view.

3. *Was Jesus able to sin?* Related to other discussions of human freedom is the question of whether or not Jesus was free to sin. What is more, if he was free to sin, was the success of his mission sure? If he was not, was his identification with humanity a sham? Was he genuinely tempted? The Scriptures assure us that Jesus was tempted—even beyond our own temptation.³¹ In short, it is hard to find in Scripture any reason to think that Jesus was not free to sin, and every reason to think that his temptations were real as well as intense. It was no sham. The question of whether he could be free to sin, and yet surely not sin, is based on the confusion of the concepts of freedom, ability, desire, and certainty. I concur with Millard Erickson who climaxes his section on this topic in his *Christian Theology* by saying: “while he *could* have sinned, it was certain that he *would* not.”³² In this statement is an affirmation of the central thesis upon which this paper is built. Ability and desire are distinct issues. Freedom does not make sin necessary. Very significantly, we can conclude that the success of Jesus' mission was secured, not by a limitation placed on his abilities, but by the greatness on his character. In this we find reason to praise him.

4. *Freedom without sin.* There are other instances of freedom without sin as well, countering the notion that freedom necessarily involves the risk of sin. One is the condition of the saints in eternal glory. A “no freedom without sin” model requires us to explain the eternal sinlessness of the saints by hypothesizing some type of limitation on their freedom. The notion that the

²⁸ We may, however, speak of one's lack of freedom being a cause of an agent's lack of action in a manner consistent with the agent's desires.

²⁹ Regardless of the appropriateness of its political application, this is the same basic reasoning employed by opponents of gun control when they argue that “guns do not kill people; people kill people.” A gun simply gives a person the freedom to do what they otherwise would not be able to do. It does not provide a motive for its use.

³⁰ The same is the case with ongoing human sin. Clearly everyone who has in fact sinned has the capacity to do so, but this alone does not address the real question: being able to sin, why do we? For that answer, we must look to the human heart and its desires.

³¹ Heb 4:15; note also Luke 22:44, cf. Heb 12:4.

³² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 720; emphasis his.

saints are less free in glory than in this life would certainly be difficult to support biblically. The instruction and images we are given about eternal glory suggest exactly the opposite. The sin of the saints will not be rooted out by reducing their capability to sin, but by purifying their beings of any desire to do so. There will be a unified heart of integrity, purely devoted to God—like Jesus. Second, we can consider God himself. If there can be no full and genuine freedom without sin, then not even God is completely free.³³ As is plain in all of Scripture, and as discussed above, this is clearly not the case. If, on the other hand, it is a question of definitions, so that we are to define freedom in such a way that it does not apply even to God, then the word has no application at all. Clearly the concept of freedom has a legitimate and valuable place in our vocabulary. We are wise to adjust any line of thinking that leads us to the point where we must define freedom in a way that allows it no application, even with regard to God himself.

VIII. HISTORICAL DEBATES

1. *Augustine and the Pelagian controversy.* This final section addresses a few specific examples from the history of Christian theology that might have been improved with a clear distinction between desire and ability. In terms of historical theology, the issue of human freedom generally is understood to begin most explicitly with Augustine, particularly with regard to his writings surrounding the Pelagian controversy. Within his great body of work, Augustine attempted what few theologians have. He tried to provide an explicit rationale for human responsibility in sins that were not within their power to avoid. He was challenged on this point because of the positions he espoused on the issues of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Augustine used the notion of universal complicity in original sin to argue for the reasonability of human responsibility for fallen sin, even while holding that the freedom to do good is hopelessly absent in the fallen condition. One of his tactics in making this point was the use of extensive hypothetical analogies.³⁴ While Augustine's argument offers an interesting perspective on the issue,

³³ Since he is eternally without sin, wickedness, or guilt.

³⁴ These analogies involve situations where a person intentionally sets himself up for the circumstances in which he would not be able to avoid doing something improper. Examples cited include that of a sleeping person, whose hand was taken by another to write something shameful, and thus could not ordinarily be held guilty of what was written. Similarly, one is not responsible for something he is forcibly made to do while bound. However, if a person became deliberately drunk so as not to wake when his hand was moved, or allowed himself to be bound so that he could not resist the force of another, he does incur guilt. In such a case, he suggests, one would rightly be held guilty for the ensuing acts, even though not free when they took place. Implicated is the notion of complicity in original sin, which caused a corruption in human nature; thus defending the appropriateness of guilt in sins committed even in a fallen condition lacking freedom or the power to resist. Augustine develops these analogies in *On Two Souls, Against the Manichaeans* (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 4 [ed. Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974] 102). The development of these concepts in Augustine's later works during and following the Pelagian controversy is discussed by William S. Babcock ("Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency," *JRE* 16 [1988] 36–37).

I do not believe that it makes the point he intends.³⁵ If, however, he had specified the distinction between ability and desire, he would not have been in a situation where there was a need to defend the notion of guilt without freedom. The focus of the debate would have been explicitly on the character of the fallen human heart, rather than on human ability.³⁶

2. *Luther and Erasmus.* A second prominent debate on the matter of human freedom was played out by Luther and Erasmus. In my assessment, both of their works are filled with a confusion of issues that could have been clarified substantially with the simple distinction between desire and ability. Erasmus challenged Luther's notion of human bondage to sin, among other means, by citing a text in Deuteronomy where Moses stresses to the Israelites that they have the ability to obey God's commandments and exhorts them to do so.³⁷ While Luther makes some legitimate points in return, he fails to address Erasmus's challenge clearly or adequately.³⁸ Rather, he essentially

³⁵ If one is unable to do something now because of free actions taken in the past that preclude it, the moral responsibility is inherent in the original free action, not in the present action, lacking freedom. If original sin renders the human race unable to obey God afterward, it only argues for the increased seriousness of original sin. It is responsible for all the wickedness that it brings about, both directly and indirectly. Humans would not add to their guilt by failing to do now something that is not now within their ability (at least not to the extent that they would if they could). They are guilty for such failure, but the guilt is attendant to the original sin with its intent. To help make the point, let me offer a contemporary example. If I am unable to meet financial obligations now because I squandered my money sinfully in the past, the moral guilt was incurred with the squandering. I was wrong to squander my funds, in part for the very reason that it would render me unable to meet my financial obligations at a later date. I do not incur any additional guilt for failing to pay my bills now when I lack the funds. I am certainly guilty for not paying the bill, but the reason I cannot do so is because I squandered the funds, and that is the source of my guilt. This, however, is not what those who would argue that humans are guilty, even though not free, would want to defend. They would agree that there is guilt incurred in original sin. However they would also assert that additional guilt is specifically incurred in ongoing sins. Indeed, it is inconceivable how it could be otherwise, in light of all of the biblical admonitions against present sins and assertions of human responsibility for them.

³⁶ I do believe this issue of the wickedness of the fallen human heart to be a thoroughly Augustinian concept, and so it would have fit easily into his treatment of these matters.

³⁷ Deut 30:11–14 includes fairly explicit words to the effect that they were able to obey which Luther never directly addresses. Erasmus introduces this text in his argument presented to Luther (Desiderius Erasmus, "On the Freedom of the Will," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*; The Library of Christian Classics, Ichthus Edition; ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969] 57).

³⁸ *Ibid.* 184–85, 204. Luther argues effectively that there is no logical connection between a command and an ability to carry it out, but does not address the moral connection, from which moral responsibility would stem. Further, Luther suggested that Moses' point was that if the people disobeyed, it was not his fault. Moses fulfilled his responsibility to bring the law to the people clearly and comprehensibly. It can be noted that this point does nothing to undermine Erasmus's argument; if anything, it reinforces it. Luther also offers examples of a loving parent and a physician who may command a child or patient to do something that they are unable to do in order to reveal the inability of the latter. This does make Luther's immediate point that there is no *logical* implication of ability when even a moral agent pronounces a "command." However, it will not make Luther's ultimate point, or discredit Erasmus's, unless the authority genuinely intends to hold the subordinate accountable for fulfilling the command. Certainly in Luther's examples, the parent/

avoided the substance of the issue raised by Erasmus in this text, and insisted on the inability of sinners to obey. As with Augustine, distinguishing ability from desire and employing language that focused on human wickedness rather than human weakness would have put him in a much better position to defend the certainty of sin without continued insistence on “inability” and its inherent problem related to moral responsibility. On the other hand, Erasmus’s focus on the matter of human freedom betrays the belief that by successfully establishing freedom, he would accomplish his objective.³⁹ Since, however, free actions require desire as well as ability, he also would need to successfully demonstrate that free natural sinners have the desire to do the things of God. This he scarcely considers. In each of their works, the issues of freedom and desire are quite obscured. Both Erasmus and Luther persist in making “ability” the issue, even in instances where the context makes it plain that the desire of the will is in view, rather than its freedom. As a result, their debate was much more muddled than it needed to be.

3. *Jonathan Edwards.* Two centuries later, Jonathan Edwards provided an analysis of the issues at question in his treatise on the *Freedom of the Will*. Edwards did a far better job than his predecessors, in my opinion, in distinguishing the root of sin from the ordinary notion of human ability, which he calls “natural ability.” To do so, he introduced a new term, “moral ability” (and its corollary, “moral inability”). In my view, Edwards coined a term to describe what existing and familiar language says more clearly. In his own words, “moral inability consists in the opposition or want of desire.”⁴⁰ While I am in substantial agreement with this Edwardsian assessment, I think that his continued use of the word “ability” fails to eliminate the unnecessary confusion in the debate and to shift the focus to human desire, where it belongs. Rather than say that sinners lack a “moral ability,” it seems much more natural to say that they lack the desire. Rather, they have a fundamental desire away from the things of God. They certainly will persist in sin in their natural condition. There is a better chance of making progress in this historic debate with the language of desire that lends greater clarity to the critical issues.

4. *Open theism.* On a more contemporary note, I find that significant aspects of open theism reflect a failure to distinguish desire from ability. Open theists tend to focus almost exclusively on the matter of human freedom, and as such are subject to the flaw in the argument of Erasmus discussed above. While a clear justification of the notion that free actions can be known

physician has no intention of holding the child/patient accountable for fulfilling the command (e.g. by punishing them when they fail). Imparting knowledge was the point of their command, not an expectation of obedience (though they might reasonably hold accountable if the child/patient did not try to fulfill the command, as this would be a matter of disobedience).

³⁹ Erasmus is not alone; he has much company in this line of thinking.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* 159.

with certainty in advance is beyond the scope of this present work, such a case might begin most effectively with a clear distinction between ability and desire. Exhaustive, certain foreknowledge, many would contend, is an entirely plausible notion with respect to the mind of God, who perfectly understands not only our abilities but also our desires and the fundamental disposition of our hearts.

5. *Arminian and Calvinist theologies.* The simple distinction between desire and ability might refocus the historic debate between Arminian and Calvinist theologies, by resolving, or at least diminishing, some of the attendant issues, such as responsibility without capability. What is more, we might be able to embrace more common terminology. It is my opinion that Calvinists have too often, and unnecessarily, surrendered the language of freedom to Arminians.⁴¹ While we do need to have careful discussions about the nature of freedom, we should be able to agree that humans enjoy a critical degree of spiritual freedom in any plain sense of the word.⁴² The focus of the debate should be on human desire, rather than human ability. Once it is, our dialogue may be more likely to proceed in a profitable manner.

6. *The contemporary philosophical debate.* In his article in the September 2008 issue of *JETS*, David M. Ciochi provides a helpful survey of the state of the debate about divine sovereignty and human freedom.⁴³ In doing so, he proposes a suspension of the debate until we achieve greater clarity regarding “what it is about human beings that justifies God in treating them as morally responsible agents.”⁴⁴ It is worth noting that it is assumed without explicit explanation or justification that “what it is about human beings” that would so justify God is some type of freedom. Two sentences before this thesis statement, the author contemplates “the sort of freedom necessary for moral responsibility.”⁴⁵ This supposition is also evident in the title of the article and throughout its text. Reflecting the debate in view, freedom is seen as the critical issue in establishing moral responsibility. I do not question the notion that freedom belongs prominently in discussions about the nature and basis of moral responsibility; however, an *exclusive* focus on freedom

⁴¹ This is not intended as a blanket assessment. There are many notable exceptions and much of the disagreement does focus on the meaning of the terms. Calvinists have, however, not infrequently allowed Arminians in the debate to persist in their definition of freedom (in the libertarian sense), and as a result claimed that humans are not free, at least *in that sense*. While this may be expedient at a certain particular moments, it obscures the position Calvinists generally intend to make.

⁴² I believe, and many others have claimed, that Arminians often use the idea of freedom in a way that is logically absurd; an unreasonable leap from the plain sense of freedom as it is used in ordinary language (and some who identify themselves as Calvinists accept this usage). Edwards makes a case for absurdity along these lines in *Freedom of the Will* 171–74.

⁴³ David M. Ciochi, “Suspending the Debate about Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom,” *JETS* 51 (2008) 573–90.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 573.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

can obscure the debate. For instance, toward the end of his article, Ciocchi raises the doctrine of hell as a matter that compounds the import of the debate.⁴⁶ In such a context, if we see freedom alone as the issue in establishing degrees of moral responsibility, we are likely to find ourselves asking whether fallen humans are *free enough* to warrant being condemned to hell. This would be a confusion of the matter. The real question is more along the lines of whether fallen humans are *wicked enough* to warrant being condemned to hell, and in what way there is a degree of freedom that indicts this wickedness in free, character-revealing actions. Keeping the focus in divine judgments of guilt on the degree of wickedness, rather than the degree of freedom, is important. Freedom plays a supporting role in the matter but ought not to be seen as the critical determinant of the severity of divine judgment.

Ciocchi's survey provides other helpful categories with which to interact with the framework presented here. Within the terminology he outlines, I am operating with a compatibilist concept of freedom. The framework outlined above can help by providing a reasonable and comprehensible approach toward understanding human responsibility in light of an affirmation of divine sovereignty, by pushing the focus to human character (which desires express) rather than ability. As a compatibilist, I affirm a significant measure of human freedom, and hold this to be compatible with divine sovereignty. Since freedom, as defined here, simply makes it possible for one to do what one desires to do, it is clear that the focus of our attempts in this debate must be upon the nature and origin of individual human desires and how these relate to moral responsibility. While recognizing the need for much further development, I understand one's desires to reflect one's moral character, upon which moral judgment should be based. We need then to consider the relationship of this moral character to divine sovereignty, which will involve such concepts as the nature of created beings, the nature of God's creation of morally responsible individuals, and the ways created humans are both like God (e.g. in being self-conscious, morally responsible agents) and unlike God (e.g. in not being eternally self-existent, but rather having a nature and existence grounded in divine creation and providence).

How this framework impacts the position of a non-compatibilist is similar, but more complex. While I believe that concepts of libertarian "freedom" include elements of self-definition that are beyond the bounds of what natural language expresses in the terminology of freedom, we must recognize that the debate has long been framed in these terms. As such, it is incumbent upon proponents of this position to clarify the difference between "libertarian freedom" and what I believe is inherent in the natural sense of freedom expressed in the notion that one can do what one desires. This libertarian freedom clearly involves much that I have included in the category of desire, since it suggests that humans can change even their own most basic desires. It must be answered then, why anyone would *desire* to do so, and whether even these more basic desires are subject to modification as well, and again, on what basis. My suspicion is that this cannot be done without reducing to

⁴⁶ Ibid. 586–90.

an absurdity, either of infinite regression or of self-creation,⁴⁷ yet even at this point, a framework that distinguishes ability from desire is helpful in that it does not allow the desire to change something about oneself to be addressed simply in terms of ability. The desire to do so is just as basic to the question. Rather than simply dismissing the distinction between ability and desire, libertarians can aid the debate by addressing it in some fashion, by offering a critique to justify its dismissal, by explaining how ability and desire are seen within a libertarian framework, or by offering an alternative model.

IX. CONCLUSION

The concepts of freedom and ability have been at the heart of many historical-theological and historical-philosophical debates. These debates have generally been more confusing than necessary by not drawing a distinction between ability and desire, and explaining how these two concepts relate to freedom, and the related issues in question. Many other theological issues, long subject to debate and ambiguity, can also be addressed with greater clarity by distinguishing ability and desire. Simply contemplating this distinction, and presenting a model for how to understand a position being defended in light of it, would be instructive. Even if a proponent of one position or another finds this framework to be either flawed or inadequate, offering either a justification for its dismissal, or an alternate model, will illuminate the debate considerably. By clarifying the terms we use in this manner and explaining their relationships to one another, there is potential for many of our dialogues to proceed in a more constructive and decisive manner.

⁴⁷ Ciocchi also identifies an absurdity of self-creation as one of the key challenges to proponents of libertarian free will (*ibid.* 280).