Human Freedom and God's Providence: Is There Conflict?

Mark Pretorius[1]

Abstract[2]

How can we reconcile human freedom with God's providence? The key, in my view, is bottom-up and top-down causality. These particular terms state that all events in the world are the result of some previous event, or events. Accordingly, all of reality is already in a sense predetermined or pre-existent and, therefore, nothing new can come into existence. But how does this impact on our actions? Are we predetermined to walk a specific path and, if so, how is this accomplished by God without violating our human freedom?

1. Introduction

Scripture does not precisely define the nature of human freedom, but philosophers and theologians do discuss it. In general, scholars usually present two main notions of freedom: *libertarianism* and *compatibilism*. These are mutually exclusive conceptions of human freedom, but both are internally consistent. Supporting the notion that both views of freedom are coherent and defensible, Flint (1988:177-179) proposes that "ultimately the view of freedom that one ought to embrace should be the view that best fits the biblical data, not our pre-conceived notions of what human freedom is or ought to be".

Before unpacking this seeming enigma regarding human freedom in current philosophical and theological literature, the two basic views need to be dealt with as they impact on one coming to a reasonable conclusion on this subject.

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[1] Mark holds an MA in Biblical Studies from the University of Johannesburg and a PhD in Systematic Theology from the University of Pretoria. He currently serves as a Senior Assessor and Postgraduate Supervisor at the South African Theological Seminary.

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The one is an *indeterministic* notion, sometimes called *libertarian free will* or *incompatibilism*. The other is a *deterministic* notion, referred to as *compatibilism* or *soft determinism*. The view of freedom to which one subscribes has dramatic implications for how one construes the relationship between divine sovereignty, omniscience, and human freedom.

What follows is a breakdown of the differences and similarities between libertarianism and compatibilism, and a possible solution to combining human freedom with God's providence.

2. Libertarianism and compatibilism

Compatibilists view human actions as causally determined, yet free (Wellum (2002:260). In other words, in contrast to a libertarianistic view, a compatibilist view of freedom perceives the human will as decisively and sufficiently inclined toward one option (Peterson et al. 1991:59). The will is deemed to be free as long as it meets the following requirements:

1. the immediate cause of the action is a desire, wish, or intention internal to the agent;
2. no external event or circumstances compels the action to be performed; and,
3. the agent could have acted differently if he or she had chosen to (see Peterson et al 1991:26-28).

If these three conditions are met, then even though the human action is determined, it may still be considered free. Feinberg (1987:400) summarises this view well when he states:

> If the agent acts in accord with causes and reasons that serve as a sufficient condition for his doing the act, and if the causes do not force him to act contrary to his wishes, then a soft determinist would say that he acts freely.

The question is: What then do philosophers and theologians mean by a libertarianistic view of freedom? Simply stated, the most basic sense of this view is that a person's act is free if it is not causally determined. For libertarians, this does not mean that one's actions are random or arbitrary. In

the view of Wellum (2002:259), reasons and causes play upon the will as one chooses, but none of them is sufficient to incline the will decisively in one direction or another. Thus, a person could have chosen other than he did. Basinger (1993:416) puts it this way: for a person to be free with respect to performing an action, he must have it within his power "to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur. However, which will actually occur has not yet been determined" (see Hasker 1983:32-44).

How then would a person committed to libertarianism conceive of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom? What is the relationship between a libertarian view of human freedom and the way one conceives of God's sovereign rule over the affairs of humanity. Without using the word in a disparaging or negative sense, one must in some sense "limit" God's sovereignty (Wellum 2002:260). Instead, "limit" is used in the sense that God freely chooses to limit Himself by virtue that He has chosen to create a certain kind of world which contains human beings with libertarian freedom. In this sense then, "limit" does not refer to a weakness or flaw in God, but rather to a self-imposed limit that is part of His plan, not a violation of it (see also Cottrell 1989:108-110).

Obviously, this view is in stark contrast to the compatibilist or soft determinist view. According to the determinist, if a person acts in accord with causes and reasons that serve as a sufficient condition for the person doing the act, and the causes do not force the person to act contrary to his wishes, then a soft determinist would say the person has acted freely. This leads one to the next point of discussion, namely, *divine omniscience*.

3. Divine omniscience

Traditionally, Christian theologians and philosophers have sought to maintain that God has complete and infallible knowledge of everything past, present, and future (Wellum 2002:262). Accordingly, Morris (1991:87) writes:

> Not only is God omniscient, He is necessarily omniscient, i.e. it is impossible that His omniscience collapse, fail, or even waver. He is, as philosophers nowadays often say, omniscient

> in every possible world. That is to say, He is actually omniscient, and there is no possible, complete and coherent story about any way things could have gone (no possible world) in which God lacks this degree of cognitive excellence.

However, as scholars have long been discussing, this view of God's omniscience does appear to generate a thorny problem. Simply put: How can one possibly conceive to be free in ones actions if God knows exactly how one will act on every occasion in the future. Morris (1991:89) poses the problem in this way:

> If God already knows exactly how we shall act, what else can we possibly do? We must act in that way. We cannot diverge from the path that He sees we shall take. We cannot prove God wrong. He is necessarily omniscient. Divine foreknowledge thus seems to preclude genuine alternatives and thus genuine freedom in the world.

Clearly, this is a valid question, especially if one brings into the equation the study of nature from a scientific perspective. For example, Karl Barth and others of the neo-orthodox persuasion used the idea of primary and secondary causes to defend divine sovereignty over nature. At the same time though, they kept the idea of free will as a God-given attribute of human nature. Furthermore, Barth (1958:148) asserted that God "rules unconditionally and irresistibly in all occurrences". Nature is God's "servant", the "instrument of His purposes". God controls, orders, and determines, for "nothing can be done except the will of God." God foreknows and also predetermines and foreordains. "The operation of God is as sovereign as Calvinist teaching describes it. In the strictest sense it is predestination". Clearly, Barth affirms, in the view of Barbour (2000:160), both divine sovereignty and creaturely autonomy. As such, God controls, and all creaturely determinations are "wholly and utterly at the disposal of His power". As a consequence, the creature "goes its own way, but in fact it always finds itself on God's way." Thus the idea is that all causality in the world is subordinate to God. For Barth, when a human hand writes with a pen, the whole action is performed by both the hand and the pen—not part by hand and part by pen. Barth further declared that creaturely causes, like the pen, are real, but "have their part only

by submission" to the divine hand that guides them (Barth 1958:42, 94, 106, 133).

To add to this, Farrer (1966:76, 90) writes that "God's agency must actually be such as to work omnipotently on, in, and through creaturely agencies, without either forcing them or competing with them". As a result, God acts through the matrix of secondary causes and is manifest only in their overall pattern. "He does not impose an order against the grain of things, but makes them follow their own bent and work out the world by being themselves". Barbour (2000:161) puts it this way, "we cannot say anything about *how* God acts; there are no 'casual joints' between infinite and finite actions and no gaps in the scientific account. So, too, the free act of a person can at the same time be ascribed to the person and to the grace of God acting in human life".

It is at this point that some scholars propose *presentism* as a plausible solution to the foreknowledge-freedom problem. Presentism is a logically consistent theory, but represents a departure from traditional Christian belief. It strong insists that God knows everything there is to know, that is, God is truly omniscient. However, presentism then adds this very critical point: it is precisely future free actions of people that are impossible to know. Swinburne (1993:175) sums it up thus: "omniscience is knowledge of everything true which is logically possible to know". Given libertarianistic freedom, they insist, it is impossible for anyone, including God Himself, to truly know what people will do since there are no antecedent sufficient conditions which decisively incline a person's will in one direction over another. The problem is: When upholding a libertarianistic view of human freedom, one denies that God can know the future free actions of human beings. Some refer to this as *open-theism*.

4. God and determinism

On the opposite side of this thinking lies the *deterministic view*, the claim that everything is determined. But is the determinist right?

Before addressing the arguments for determinism, it is necessary to correct some misconceptions about the deterministic position. According to Hasker (1983:37), it must be most strongly emphasised that determinists do not deny

that people make choices. If they did deny this, their position would be absurd, but they do not. Besides, the experience of choosing—seeing alternatives, weighing up desirability, and finally making up one's mind—is not any different whether one is a libertarian or a determinist. Thus, while determinists believe that there are sufficient conditions which will govern their choices, they do not know at any given time what those determinants are, or how they will decide as a result of them. So, like everyone else, they simply have to make up their own minds. As a result, the difference between the liberterianistic and determinist lies in interpreting the experience of choice, not in the experience itself.

What are the arguments for determinism? For some (perhaps many) determinists, determinism seems to have the status of an ultimate principle. For example, Leibniz (1996:66) found the *principle of sufficient reason* to be a necessary truth of reason. This particular principle states that for anything which occurs, there must be some sufficient reason that *it* occurs rather than something else. As such, Hasker (1983:38) asks: "And how can this be doubted? If there is no *sufficient* reason for something to happen, then this means that the reason that actually exists is *insufficien*t, and if that were so, the event would not take place."

However, Barrett (2004:146-147) believes differently. He states that the idea of divine providential action through hidden introduced active information—God subtly embeds within a person information to bring forth His will—is consonant with that of a gracious Creator who allows the creation to be itself and to have room to develop through the exercise of human free will, including the pathways of free procedures. This may also be accomplished via divinely installed guiding principles of chance and necessity. In Christian theology it is the Creator-Spirit who is thus creatively at work throughout space-time (see John 5:15; Rev 21:5). This Spirit of life is referred to by Taylor (1972:27-28) as the *go-between God.* He states:

> God is ever at work in nature, in history and in human living, and wherever there is a flagging or corruption or self-destruction in God's handiwork, He is present to renew and energize and create again … If we think of a Creator at all, we are to find Him always on the inside of creation. And if God is

> really on the inside, we must find Him in the process, not in the gaps. We know now that there are no gaps … If the hand of God is to be recognised in His continuous creation, it must be found not in isolated intrusions, not in any gaps, but in the very process itself.

Peacocke (1993:174-175) likens the role of the Creator to that of the composer

> who, beginning with an arrangement of notes in an apparently simple subject, elaborates and expands it into a fugue by a variety of devices of fragmentation, augmentation and re-association … Thus might the Creator be imagined to enable (the unfolding of) the potentialities of the universe which He himself has given it, nurturing by His redemptive and providential actions those that are to come to fruition in the community of free beings—an improviser of unsurpassed ingenuity—a composer extemporizing a fugue on a given theme.

Although arguments such as these have considerable weight, many determinists believe the strongest reasons for their position come from the theory and practice of modern science. The most general scientific argument for determinism is found in the claim that determinism is a "methodological assumption", a "necessary presupposition" of science (Hasker 1983:39). The scientist is seeking to understand, explain, and control nature; therefore, the way to reach this goal is by discovering and stating the universal laws to which natural processes conform. The scientist, to begin with, does not know what the laws are, that is, what he is trying to determine through investigation. However, it is absolutely essential to assume that such laws exist (i.e., the ones that determinism holds), for if he does not assume this, the whole endeavour makes no sense at all. And this applies as much to the science of human behaviour as to any other part of science. Thus Skinner (1962:257) states: "You can't have a science about a subject matter which hops capriciously about. Perhaps we can never prove that man isn't free; it's an assumption. But the increasing success of a science of behaviour makes it more and more plausible."

One should note that scientists can only presuppose determinism as a working hypothesis. As such, the claim that everything is determined is not a scientific conclusion, but rather a philosophical assumption. As Evans (1996:52) puts it:

> No one has actually discovered the scientific laws that the determinists believe underlie all human behaviour. Though several generations of psychologists, sociologists, and social scientists of other stripes have laboured mightily, no one knows the laws of human behaviour that are in any way comparable to the laws discovered by the physical scientists.

5. God's actions

There is no doubt that the last twenty years has seen a remarkable renewal of interest in the relation of theology and science (see Sanders 2002). One particularly difficult tangle of issues has to do with the idea that God acts in the world, a belief which is deeply rooted in the theistic traditions. From a scientific view, Murphy (1996:4) defines these actions as a *bottom-up and top-down causation.*

> The fundamental forces of physics underlie chemistry and biology, allowing emergent levels of order in the hierarchical structure of systems. Basic physical laws determine what happens at the microscopic level, and hence underlie functioning at the macroscopic levels, through bottom-up causation. The higher levels in turn, however, affect the processes at work at the lower levels through top-down causation (see also Peacocke 1993).

What is the relation between theological depictions of the world as the scene of divine action, and scientific descriptions of the world as an intelligible structure of natural law? Can God be understood to act entirely in and through the regular structures of nature or does a robust account of divine action also require the affirmation that God acts to redirect the course of events in the world, bringing about effects that would not have occurred had God not so acted? If one says the latter, then is one committed to the claim that God at

least sometimes performs miracles, in the familiar (if truncated) modern sense of an event caused by God that "violates" the laws of nature?

No doubt a theistic biblical worldview involves a strong conception of divine sovereignty over the world and human affairs, even as it presumes human freedom and responsibility. While too numerous to list here, biblical passages affirming God's sovereignty and divine action have been grouped by Carson (1981:24-35) under four main headings: (a) God is the creator, ruler, and possessor of all things, (b) God is the ultimate personal cause of all that happens, (c) God elects His people, and (d) God is the unacknowledged source of good fortune or success. As such, no one taking the many scriptural passages attesting to God's actions in the world seriously can embrace currently fashionable libertarian revisionism, which denies God's sovereignty over the contingent events of history.

However, there is no doubt according to Barrett (2004:142), that divine action is a long-standing topic of debate. If the world is no longer construed in terms of the mechanistic Newtonian picture but rather as a world of flexibility and openness to change, what is the manner and scope of divine action and wherein lies the causal joint? Where does God actually act? Furthermore, has God in eternity past *determined* the course of all future events? The key, in my view, is bottom-up and top-down causality.

6. Bottom-up and top-down causality

These particular terms state that all events in the world are the result of some previous event, or events. Accordingly, all of reality is already in a sense predetermined or pre-existent, and therefore nothing new can come into existence. This closed view of the universe sees all events in the world simply as effects of other prior effects—a sort of *supervenience* or *emergence* taking place—and has particular implications for morality, science, and theology. Ultimately, if determinism is correct, then all events in the future are as unalterable as are all events in the past. Consequently, human freedom is simply an illusion and the need of prayer, for example, is irrelevant in changing surrounding reality, as its course of action—in a sense—has already been determined. The question then is: how does this affect or impact on human freedom?

Regarding the question of determinism, Murphy (1995) has proposed that God determines all *quantum indeterminacies* but arranges that law-like regularities usually come about in order to make stable structures and scientific investigation possible, and to ensure that human actions have dependable outcomes, so that moral choices are thus possible. As such, orderly relationships do not constrain God, since He includes them in His purposes. Murphy holds that in human life God acts both at the quantum and at higher levels of mental activity, but does it in such a way that it does not violate human freedom.

An alternative would be to say that while most quantum events occur by chance, God influences certain quantum events without violating the statistical laws of quantum physics (see Russell 1998). However, a possible objection to this model is that it assumes bottom-up causality within nature once God's action has occurred, and thus seems to concede the reductionism's claim that the behaviour of all entities is determined by their smallest parts (or lowest levels). The action would be bottom-up even if one assumed that God directed His intents to the larger wholes (or higher levels) affected by these quantum events. However, most scholars in this field also allow for God's action at higher levels, which then results in a top-down influence on lower levels, as well as quantum effects from the bottom-up.

In line with this, Peacocke (1993:215) says that without argument, God exerts a top-down causality on the world. In his view, God's action is a boundary condition or constraint on relationships at lower levels that does not violate lower-level laws. Generally, boundary conditions may be introduced not just at the spatial or temporal boundaries of a system, but also internally through any additional specification allowed by lower-level laws. In human beings, God could influence the highest evolutionary level, that of mental activity, thereby modifying the neural networks and neurons in the brain.

Peacocke (1993:217) further maintains that divine action is effected in humans down the hierarchy of natural levels. As a result, one has at least some understanding of the relationships between adjacent levels. He suggests that God communicates His purposes through the pattern of events in the world. Thus, one can look on evolutionary history as acts of an agent who expresses intentions but does not follow an exact predetermined plan. Moreover, he says,

God influences one's memories, images, and ideas, just as ones thoughts influence the activity of neurons.

As such, ideas of top-down causation are invoked by both Peacocke (1993:157-165) and Polkinghorne (1998:60; 1994:31-32), but in different ways. Peacocke speaks of the relationship between Creator and creation in panentheistic terms, placing great emphasis on the immanence of God who is all the time creating in and through the processes of the world. These processes are themselves God's action and are thus constrained to be what they are in all their subtlety and fecundity by virtue of the way God interacts with the world-as-a-whole. Sanders (2002:213) finds Peacocke's position to be "the most promising current theory", though he acknowledges that it operates at a high level of abstraction. Accordingly, knowing the interconnectedness of the world to the finest detail, one thus envisages God as being able to interact with the world "at a *supervenient* level of totality"—*holistically*—thereby bringing about particular events and patterns of events (i.e., His predetermined plan). To further expand on the concept of supervenience, Murphy (1996:23) states that it is a term coined by philosophers "to refer to the relation between properties of the same system that pertain to different levels of analysis". However, Murphy does acknowledge that there are a variety of definitions of supervenience, meaning that the term can be used to describe how higher-level properties supervene on lower-level properties but are not reducible to them. Thus, for example, mental properties can be said to supervene on properties of the neurological system; moral properties supervene on psychological or sociological properties.

Taking the above into consideration, Barbour (2000:170) states that if quantum events have necessary but not sufficient physical causes, and if they are not completely determined by the relationships described by the laws of physics, their final determination might be made directly by God. What appears to be chance—which atheists take as an argument against theism—may be the very point at which God acts. Such interaction, then, amounts to the input of information of a pattern-forming nature; the energy content of which can be vanishingly small so that there is no breach in the causal network of natural law. Indeed, it is a form of top-down causation that Peacocke prefers to call *whole-part influence*. Thus, in the view of Murphy (1996:20), Peacocke has made an important contribution to the dialogue between

theology and science by suggesting that theology be understood as the science at the top of the hierarchy, since it studies the most complex of all systems, the interaction between God and the entire universe. Like Sanders (2002), Murphy believes that Peacocke has made an important contribution with his model. For Peacocke, his concern is always to interpret the world's happenings as naturalistically as possible, seeing this as a crucial task of theology in the scientific age. However, in the view of Barbour (2000:170), scientific research finds only law and chance, but perhaps in God's knowledge all events are foreseen and predetermined through a combination of law and particular divine action. Since God's action would be scientifically undetectable, it could be neither proved nor refuted by science. This would exclude any proof of God's action of the kind sought in natural theology, but it would not exclude the possibility of God's action affirmed on other grounds in a wider theology of nature.

Consequently, Polkinghorne (1998) also speaks of top-down causality through providing similarly energy-less *active information*, although he suggests a more direct input into the world's processes—*chaos concept*. In my view, "chaos" is difficult to define. According to Gleick (1988:306), of the chaos scientists he interviewed "No one could quite agree on a definition of the word itself". However, in the view of Polkinghorne, with the chaos concepts of *butterfly effect* and *strange attractor* in mind, it is conceivable that pattern-forming information can lead a system from one arrangement to another. Meaning, since any trajectory from one point within its strange attractor to another does not involve any change of total energy. Thus, Polkinghorne suggests, the divine will could be exerted within any macroscopic part of the world's structure. Besides, he also believes that there is a greater dynamical openness for divine agency via *chaotic* systems than simply through *holistic* operation on the world-as-a-whole. However, Bak (1997:31) has challenged this theory. According to him, the chaotic theory is not robust, since the critical state only occurs in the ephemeral interface between disordered and ordered states. Furthermore, chaotic systems tend to oscillate back and forth due to the strange attractor and cannot build up unique systems slowly over time. In Bak's (1997:31) words, "Chaos theory cannot explain complexity". However, according to Polkinghorne (1998:36), when challenged, macroscopic physical systems—even in their chaotic mode—follow

deterministic equations and therefore cannot be expected to offer any room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, he states, the equations can be understood as estimations to true physical reality, applicable in only those rare and specific situations in which a system can be treated as totally isolated from its environment.

Could divine causality perhaps function only through those who submit by faith to God. Meaning, if people render their wills to God, believing that He knows best, they can then say that no violation of human freedom is forthcoming, since it was freely given over to God to do as He pleases. Thus, when they freely render their wills over to God, He can freely exercise top-down-causality through them, to fulfil His will on the earth. Perhaps those who do not freely submit their wills are not in God's will, so to speak; thus their prayers, for example, are not necessarily answered, specifically if they are not part of God's providential plan for their and others' lives? Therefore, the bottom-up causality will still affect their course of action, so God's divine will is still coming about throughout creation, even though uncommitted minds or mental processors are in the equation.

To sum up, one could present it as follows: God could, in a sense, place laws of determinacy into cells at the quantum level. From this a *determined emergence* could occur throughout the different levels till it reaches the mental states (see Murphy 1996:23). From this mental state, ideas could emerge—one could call them *God ideas* (see Barbour 2000:170). It is at this level that one could either determine or reject, by an act of free-will, to go forward with the emerging ideas to bring about changes in the natural realm of reality. For Murphy (1996:25), this is where top-down *action* occurs; when human volition is involved. Consequently, this brings about the necessary causal changes with the capacity to influence that which sustains its very existence—the natural realm. Thus one has the combination of upward determinism and downward causation. This then brings about human experience, which then changes and adjusts human nature as God would have.

When using prayer as an example of how the process may work, one could say that prayer is the causal joint to start the process of bringing about His will on this earth as the person praying, to a large degree, is rendering their will to a higher power. In other words, as one submits to God, so the ideas and desires

regarding what to pray subtly come on a person's thoughts through emergent properties determined by God at the quantum level. When one prays out those ideas and thoughts that emerge, one is, in a sense, praying God's determined will on the earth, and as a result, things begin to change in the physical.

7. Conclusion

Despite the expression of hope suggested by a libertarianistic view of human freedom, we must realise just how significant is this sense of risk that God supposedly accepts (Ware 2000:51). This is especially so when He chose to create the kind of world He has created. The fact is that the view in question brings into existence a kind of world in which He largely really only exercises a power of love and persuasion towards His volitional creatures. All their free decisions, unknown in advance by Him, have the potential of either advancing or violating His purposes. The success of these purposes rests, rather significantly, in others' hands. One then has to say that not even God *knows* whether His purposes will be fulfilled. We must conclude, therefore, that a libertarianistic view of human freedom is not an option for a theistic view of God. Rather a soft-deterministic view, which merges the ideas of bottom-up and top-down causality, is the better option. In this way, human freedom is not violated, but works within the bounds of Gods providence and sovereignty to bring about His will on earth.

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