

# Would God Have Free Will?

by David Johnson

There has been a lot of time and effort spent debating whether human beings have free will, and rightly so, it is an important and interesting question. However there has been very little discussion (at least until now) concerning whether God would have free will. I should note that I am talking about the Western conception of God, and more specifically the view that comes from the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, mixed with Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, which is sometimes referred to as Classical Theism.<sup>1</sup>

First we need to define free will. One definition is simply ‘voluntary choice or decision’; another is: ‘freedom of humans to make choices that are not determined by prior causes or by divine intervention.’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary.)

In contrast, the view known as ‘Determinism’ is: ‘The theory that everything that happens must happen as it does and could not have happened any other way.’ (Cambridge Online Dictionary.)

So another way of asking this question is to ask whether God’s thoughts and actions are determined; if they are then God does not have free will.<sup>2</sup> Why might one argue that God’s actions, and even his thoughts are determined? It is because of the characteristics that God is said to have, such as Immutability. We will get to that one, but first let’s talk about God’s purported necessary existence.

There are a number of philosophical arguments that claim God’s existence is logically necessary. According to these arguments there are three possible types of existence: 1) That which is

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<sup>1</sup> My argument may not apply to some lesser known conceptions of God. For example, the religious tradition that I was raised in, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a.k.a. Mormonism, conceives of God as a perfected man. Agency is considered fundamental, even preceding life on earth: according to the church’s view Satan and his host were cast down from heaven because they chose to rebel against God and we are here on earth because we chose correctly in this pre-mortal realm to follow God’s plan for our spiritual development. Because choice and agency are so fundamentally a part of the church’s doctrine there is a built-in assumption that humans do indeed have free will. That may not actually be true, but if we assume that humans have free will then it would make sense that God, being a perfected human, would also have free will. My argument would still have some relevance to Mormon beliefs about God but not as much as for Classical Theism. That may also be true for other lesser known denominations within the three Abrahamic religions.

<sup>2</sup> One other position that I did not mention is Compatibilism, or Soft Determinism, which is the view that Determinism is correct but that people still have moral responsibility for their actions in spite of this. Compatibilists use a different definition of ‘freedom’ than metaphysical freedom and argue that we ought to make a distinction between acts which are caused internally and those that have causes which are external to the agent. I will not be discussing Compatibilism here because it is a type or species of Determinism (hence the name ‘Soft Determinism’), so if one had a Compatibilist view in reference to God’s freedom then the answer to the original question would be no, God does not have free will. I want to stay focused on Determinism versus Indeterminism, or the Libertarian view.

logically impossible, such as square-circles, which could not ever exist because it would be self-contradictory. 2) Things which are logically possible but not logically necessary, or in other words contingent. This would be the type of existence that you and I have, along with most of the items that one can think of. It is logically possible for a contingent thing to exist, but it is also logically possible for it to not exist. 3) The last type is necessary existence. Just as it was logically necessary that a square-circle could not exist, in this case it would be logically contradictory to say that the thing does not exist. It is argued that 'A necessary existent exists' is a tautological statement, or a claim that is always and necessarily true. Various forms of the cosmological argument assert that a necessary existent is required to explain the existence of contingent things. Various forms of the ontological argument claim to be able to prove that a necessary being exists simply by analyzing the concept or definition of what a necessary being is.

Let's assume for the sake of argument that God is a necessary being. If his existence is logically necessary then it follows that he does not have the freedom to end his own existence. It is not a matter of will, it is a logical necessity; God could not end his own existence any more than he could bring into existence a square-circle; it is not logically possible to do, and even an omnipotent being cannot do something that is logically impossible. Necessary existence entails that God is compelled to continue existing whether he wants that or not. One hopes that he never becomes suicidal because he would be destined to just be miserable in his continued existence forever. Perhaps he is miserable and that is why he has such temper tantrums from time to time and does things like destroying everybody in the world except for eight people in a worldwide flood; since he cannot kill himself he kills a bunch of other beings instead.

Necessary existence is not the only necessary characteristic or attribute that God is said to have. There would be many. According to the view of God that comes from the influence of Plato and Aristotle's philosophy God has no accidental or coincidental properties.

An example of an 'accidental' characteristic, to use Aristotle's terminology, would be the fact that Socrates was born in Athens, or that he happened to be his given height. Those are considered to be characteristics that are not essential to Socrates' being. He could have easily been born at some other time period, or in Sparta rather than Athens, or been half an inch taller without it resulting in a self-contradiction. It is necessary that a triangle has three angles. Having three angles is an essential characteristic for all triangles, if x does not have three angles it is not a triangle. But having the length of one of its sides measure 4 centimeters is not an essential characteristic that it must have to be a triangle, that would be considered an accidental characteristic or property.

God is believed to have no accidental characteristics. Any characteristic that he has is logically necessary. He does not lose any of his attributes or ever acquire any new ones. God is a fully actualized being, with no potentiality to be anything else, or to be any other way than how he is right now. All of God's attributes are fully and completely actualized, have always been so, and always will be.

One reason for this is that God is said to be a being of pure form with no matter, so there is no potentiality for change. According to Plato and Aristotle, when something changes (at least in the physical sense) it does so by having its matter take on a new form and losing the prior form. But if there is something which is pure form without any matter it will never change. Those who are believers might say that 'form' is equivalent to 'spirit' if one thinks that spirit or 'soul' is not composed of matter, and argue that this has scriptural backing when the Bible asserts that 'God is a spirit'. (John 4:24.)

The Bible also seems to corroborate a lot of this with other verses that speak of God not changing, such as Hebrews 13:8, which says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. This is sometimes referred to as God's Immutability. Not only is God eternal in terms of his existence, but God is always the same because he always has all of the same logically necessary fully actualized characteristics. Since God already has all possible perfections and no imperfections any change would make him worse or less than he currently is, so there is no change.

But if God never changes then he would never change his mind about anything. So is what he wants and believes necessary? If it is then it is determined.

From where would a 'free' decision originate? There would be no new desires at any point; if God has desires they would always be the exact same ones that he has always had, so where would the desire to make a different decision and take a different course of action than what he has always done come from?

Sacred texts and some philosophical arguments claim that all of creation came into existence through the will and power of God. But could he have willed it to be any other way? I do not see how if it has been and always will be eternally willed to occur at that point in time. It must be logically necessary, since it has always been so, and always will be. Creation itself is not eternal, or it does not have to be, but God willing it to occur when it does is apparently eternal and necessary. So was it a compulsion to create, and to do so when he did? How could it have been a voluntary choice?

All of God's actions would be completely and totally predictable long before they occur because they are determined by God's fully actualized characteristics, which never change, so God never changes, and thus God's actions never change. Because of that God could not have any spontaneity in his decision making. There is no randomness to his decisions that would make his actions unpredictable.

Now I do not want to give the impression that having accidental properties is the same as or guarantees having free will. It is probably the case that humans do not have free will despite the fact that we each have accidental or non-essential properties. I see possessing accidental properties as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for having free will. Thus, my argument is

that if God does *not* have accidental properties then it follows that he does *not* have free will. But that fact that we humans do have accidental properties does not guarantee that we have free will. In fact, it seems most likely to me that our actions and even our thoughts are probably determined by physical causation. There might not be anything that has true free will.

I would also say something similar about spontaneity and randomness in decision-making. Spontaneity in making decisions would also be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for free will, so having spontaneous unpredictable thoughts and actions does not guarantee that one has free will, as they could still originate from physical causes or some other source that is determined, but *not* having any random unpredictable thoughts or spontaneous acts does guarantee that one does *not* have free will.

Would an omniscient being ever deliberate when making decisions, not being sure what to do? I do not see why, because it is not thinking it through or spending more time studying the issue that is going to lead to an omniscient being knowing any more about it than he knew before. An omniscient being never lacks knowledge concerning the facts, he already knows everything that it is possible to know, so the indecision could not come from a lack of information, it would have to come from a lack of certainty regarding how he should respond to the factual information. But if he knows all of the factual information then he must also know what the best outcome would be. ('Best outcome' is defined as the one that he would prefer.) So why wouldn't he always know what he wants to do?

There would be no deliberation regarding what to do at any point. God would always know what do, and would have already decided what he wanted to do long before he does it. All of his actions would be automatic. He would never act impulsively because doing so would lead to a less good outcome from what had already been decided; we know that because if it was the best outcome it would have been foreseen long ago as such and thus it would not be an 'impulsive' decision at all but rather a pre-planned choice from long ago, or perhaps all along.

God's omniscience is often discussed in reference to human free will. It is regarded as a paradox for theists who believe in both human free will and God's omniscience to explain how the two are compatible. Here is the problem: Because God is omniscient he knows everything that it is possible to know, which means that he could foresee a human being's actions before they occur; so are those human actions freely chosen if it is impossible to do anything other than what God foresees?

A theologian could argue that God's foreknowledge would not be a cause of the person's behavior so that behavior could still be freely chosen. But I feel like that only partly resolves the problem because that never addresses why God would have a perfect knowledge of what the person is going to do before it actually happens. If there is genuine human free will I do not see how even an omniscient being could know what choice will be made before it is made. Even if God is aware of all physical causes in the environment and has a complete understanding of how the person's brain functions at that moment, if those choices are not determined by any

antecedent causes then it seems to me that the choice would be unpredictable, even for an omniscient being.

If the reason that God knows what a person will do before he or she acts is because God has a perfect knowledge of genetics, biology, chemistry, and physics, and knows everything that is going on in that person's brain as well as all the physical causes that exist in the world, similar to Laplace's Demon,<sup>3</sup> then those actions are not free; they are causally determined by physical causes in the world, and because God has a perfect knowledge of those physical causes he has the ability to perfectly predict the person's future actions. God's foreknowledge would not be the cause of the behavior, but the reason that God would have that foreknowledge is because human actions are determined by physical causes in the world and God has a perfect knowledge of those physical causes. God's foreknowledge would thus be an indicator that humans do not have free will rather than the reason or cause for why they do not have free will. The bottom line, though, is that humans do not have free will if God can perfectly predict all of their actions before those actions occur.

But the real reason that I raised this issue is that I think there could be another problem for the theist that is related to this one, and that is whether God's omniscience is incompatible with his own free will. Surely he would be able to foresee what he will do long before he actually does it. Once again one might argue that God's foreknowledge of events is not a cause of those events, and that is true, but the only way that he would have that foreknowledge is if he has a perfect knowledge of the causes, whatever those causes might be. If there are no antecedent causes for his behavior then his behavior would be unpredictable, even to himself.

Maybe one could argue that this is a possible solution to the puzzle, because if it is genuinely impossible to know future events then perhaps God could still be considered omniscient even if he does not know the future. But how could God make prophecies about future events? It seems to me that an omniscient being would have to be able to predict at least some future events because we know that some things are causally determined by physical causes in the world. Newton's three laws of motion, for example, would govern at least some physical events. Nobody claims that a rock has free will. If God knows that a rockslide is about to happen, and he can see that you are in its path and could not physically escape (at least without divine intervention) then he would know that you are going to be crushed by it before that actually happens. He may in fact know a long time before it actually occurs. He will be able to anticipate it with certainty at some point before it happens because of his perfect knowledge of physical causation. Even a computer, or in some instances a person could do that.

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Laplace (1749-1827) argued that if there were an intellect who knew all of the laws of nature perfectly, and if this intellect has one complete description of the universe at any given moment, then he could predict all future events and retrodict or retrace all past events perfectly. Laplace did not say that this being is God; he may not have believed in God, or not wanted to say that it was God he was thinking of because of a possible fear of persecution by the church (Descartes may have done that as well with his 'evil demon' who could potentially control people's thoughts) but an omniscient being would be a perfect candidate for this.

Now maybe God's own actions are not governed by physical laws of nature but if his actions affect the physical world then at the very least his actions would determine, at least to a large extent, the physical events that take place in the world. For instance, his decision regarding whether or not to save you from dying in that rockslide that he knows is going to happen would have a significant impact upon what else happens in the world. (Consider the Butterfly Effect.) We may assume that he must be making thousands or even millions of similar decisions all the time, which would have a huge impact upon the future course of events. If his actions regarding whether or not to intervene in the natural world have such a profound effect upon the natural world how could he predict future events in the physical world with any accuracy unless he also knows what his own future decisions regarding it will be?

To me it seems clear that God must know what he is going to do long before he actually does it, at least concerning events in the natural world. But if all of his actions can be predicted with perfect accuracy before he actually does them then it is difficult to imagine how those acts could not be determined. How is he able to predict them all with perfect accuracy if they are not?

It is said that God will never do anything immoral, such as being unjust. It is not fully explained by theologians why this is the case. If they only mean that God would not do it because he would lose his position or standing, or even his moral authority to lead and guide others, then we would have to say that it is *possible* for God to be immoral, and that he genuinely could be tempted even if he never actually acted upon it. But if one trillion times out of one trillion he never acts upon such impulses, and presumably never will, then is it really a choice? If it is really a free choice between at least two alternatives why does he always choose the one and never the other?

But it seems like the claim of God's moral goodness goes beyond merely this, at least for most theists. According to some views, it is not just that he will not, he *cannot* do anything immoral. According to the doctrine of Impeccability God is *unable* to commit sin or to do anything wrong. Hebrews 6:18, for example, says that it is impossible for God to lie.

Many believers would be offended by the notion that God would ever commit an immoral act, or even be tempted to do so. They would probably argue that God's goodness and morality are part of his very nature. It would never be a genuine consideration for God to act immorally.

But if God's nature is such that he cannot do anything immoral then he must not have free will. He does not have autonomy when it comes to making moral decisions; he is compelled by logic and reason to be morally good and programmed or compelled by his own nature. It would be like a computer or a robot that cannot go against its programming. So is God really even a moral agent? I do not see how he could be if there are not genuine alternatives for him to choose from.

The Problem of Evil is an argument against God's existence. According to one version of the argument it is logically inconsistent to say that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally good and yet there is evil in the world. Another version that is less formal (known as the evidential or

inductive version) says that there are at least some instances of suffering which are unnecessary, and that such a being would prevent those instances of suffering even if other instances must be allowed. For example, perhaps Christ's suffering on the cross was necessary and could not be prevented (at least according to the Christian viewpoint) but some natural disasters could have been prevented, or at least greatly mitigated; another example might be that perhaps at least some of the starving children in Africa could have been saved without losing some greater good. The fact that instances of purportedly unnecessary suffering exist count as significant evidence against the claim that there really is an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being because such a being would have prevented those instances of suffering.

I am sympathetic to the Problem of Evil argument myself, particularly the informal version.<sup>4</sup> But, not surprisingly, theists have not conceded. According to the Free Will Defense, God chooses not to intervene to stop instances of suffering and evil because he considers preserving human free will to be more important. Notice that the claim is that God chooses to do this, so it seems to be assumed that God has free will, and that he makes this decision in order to preserve human choice because apparently human free will is very important. For example C. S. Lewis writes in his book *The Problem of Pain*:

We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free will by His creatures at every moment: so that a wooden beam became soft as grass when it was used as a weapon, and the air refused to obey me if I attempted to set up in it the sound waves that carry lies or insults. But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void; nay, if the principle were carried out to its logical conclusion, evil thoughts would be impossible, for the cerebral matter which we use in thinking would refuse its task when we attempted to frame them.

The Free Will Defense assumes that there is a connection between free will and the ability to commit sin or immoral acts. It is argued here (and by others elsewhere) that if one cannot commit immoral acts then one does not have free will; well, if that is true then a likely unanticipated but correct conclusion that follows from it is that God must not have free will. Wrong actions are impossible for God, so according to Lewis' reasoning God's freedom of the will is void; in fact, even evil thoughts would be impossible for God. It would probably not be physical causes such as cerebral matter that would cause this, but something about his nature would prevent it. His choices would be determined by his necessary and fully actualized attributes.

If God's actions and thoughts are or would be fully determined I think that greatly undermines the Free Will Defense. It would be strange to argue that God allows evil in order to preserve

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<sup>4</sup> Here is a version by William L. Rowe that I think is particularly strong: 1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. 2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. 3. Therefore there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

human free will when God does not have free will himself. God could not produce 'sound waves that carry lies or insults' himself, but he is willing to tolerate the horrible injustices that occur in this world in order to ensure that humans have the ability to hurl insults at each other, and do far far worse? That seems very implausible.

Is having free will even a good thing? If God has all possible perfections, actualized to their highest possible degree, and yet he does not have free will then we may conclude that free will must not be good. If Anselm is right that 'God is whatever it is better to be than not to be' (Proslogion 5) then God is the ultimate standard of perfection and goodness. By definition it is not possible for God to lack a good thing. The only attributes that he would not have are those that are bad or evil, so if he does not have free will then free will must be an imperfection or flaw. So why would God want to preserve human free will if free will is an imperfection?

It is notable that Satan would have free will, otherwise it would not be just to blame him for his immoral acts, or at least that is what Hard Determinists say. Part of the reason that Satan is considered evil is because he knows better and he could do otherwise, but he chooses to be bad. This further shows that there is a connection between immoral behavior and having free will.

If God himself does not have free will it weakens the case that free will is essential for human development and moral growth. If we were morally perfect, as God is, then apparently we would not have free will either. So why would human free will be so important to preserve that God is willing to allow evil and the pain and suffering that it causes?

Is yielding to temptation really even 'freedom' anyway? You may be doing what you want to do, so in that way it is, but you would be compelled to act, or tempted, by certain physical desires. Consider the drug addict or a person cheating on his spouse and having an affair with a co-worker. It may seem like freedom because the person is doing what he wants to do regardless of what others may tell him to do, or want him to do, so he is free in the sense of being able to act contrary to the wishes of others, but the underlying reason that he wants to do it is because he is a slave to his own passions, whether those temptations come from biology, psychology, or something else. Is that freedom? Is that really something that God would want to preserve?

Finally, can God really be considered omnipotent if he cannot commit an immoral act? Cheating or being unjust is not inherently self-contradictory like creating a square-circle or a rock so big that even he cannot lift it would be. If something is logically possible an omnipotent being should be able to do it. Obviously immoral acts are logically possible, as evidenced by the fact that humans do them all the time. Now perhaps the theist would argue that it would be self-contradictory for God, even if it is not so for us, because by definition he is morally perfect and intrinsically unable to sin, so committing an immoral action would contradict his moral perfection. But there is a difference between saying that two claims or two statements contradict one another and saying that one of them is self-contradictory. Creating a square-circle is not possible because it is self-contradictory, and that would be the case for all beings; performing an immoral act is not inherently self-contradictory, it is something that we humans can do but



apparently God could not do. It is not that he could but chooses not to, it is literally impossible for him. So how could he be considered omnipotent? This is a limit on his power to act. God could not even lie in order to bring about some greater good, as any human moral agent could do. (Once again, Hebrews 6:18. Titus 1:2 also says that God cannot lie.) Is moral perfection really logically consistent with omnipotence?

Humans probably do not really have free will either, but it is at least logically possible that we could, even if empirically it seems unlikely that we really do. I do not think that it is even logically possible for God, as described, to have free will.