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# FREE MORAL AGENCY

DS212—Doctrine of Humanity  
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## LIBERTARIAN FREEDOM

- Defining Libertarian Freedom
  - Libertarian is often a presupposition of theologians and philosophers.
    - John Frame notes how this functions for open theists: “Libertarian free will serves as a kind of grid, through which all other theological assertions must pass a general criterion for testing the truth of all other doctrines. For the open theist, only those doctrines that are compatible with libertarian freedom are worth of consideration; all others must be rejected at the outset. And typically, open theists do not argue the case for libertarian freedom; rather they assume it. It is their presupposition.”<sup>1</sup>
    - People hold to this view in order to preserve moral responsibility. That itself is a noble desire. Human beings are moral agents and have moral responsibility. However, this type of uncritical adoption of such a presupposition is problematic.
  - Definition of Libertarianism
    - William Hasker defines libertarian freedom: “An agent that is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.”<sup>2</sup>
    - For an agent to have responsibility for a given action, he or she must be able to otherwise. That being said, libertarians do not outright reject that the will may be influenced by factors both internal and external.
- Examining Libertarian Freedom
  - We must consider whether Scripture teaches that fallen man has the power of contrary choice.
  - Scripture teaches that after the fall man lacks the volitional capacity to please God. Therefore, he does not possess libertarian freedom, because he cannot perform the moral actions requisite.
    - Building upon Psalm 14 and Psalm 53, Paul makes clear in Romans 3:9–20 that no one seeks or pleases God.
    - He further explains this in Romans 8:7–8.
      - According to Romans 8:7b, those in the flesh do not submit to God’s law but Paul says even more strongly that they *cannot* submit to God’s law (οὐδὲ γὰρ δύνανται). Romans 8:8 is similar. But more generally, those in the flesh cannot please God (οὐ δύνανται).

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<sup>1</sup> John Frame, *No Other God*, 119.

<sup>2</sup> William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective” in *Openness of God*, 136–137.

- It is clear, therefore, that in his natural state, the sinner does not possess the ethical power to please God. The only thing the sinner has the power to do is displease God.
- Genesis 6:5 emphasizes this point.
  - וְכָל-יִצְרָר מַחְשְׁבֹת לִבּוֹ רָק רָק כָּל-הַיּוֹם—“and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart only evil all the day”
  - Moses characterizes pre-diluvian depravity in a comprehensive fashion:
    - Extensive: וְכָל—every
    - Internal: יִצְרָר מַחְשְׁבֹת לִבּוֹ—(every) imagination of the thoughts of his heart
    - Exclusive: רָק רָק—only evil
    - Constant: כָּל-הַיּוֹם—all day
  - Genesis 8:21 teaches something similar: “And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth (“כִּי יִצְרָר לֵב הָאָדָם רָק מִנְעֻרָיו”). Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done.”
- Continuing this theme in Mark 7:21–23, Jesus teaches that sin arises from the heart.
  - Mark 7:21–23—<sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup> coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.
    - The prepositional phrase ἐκ τῆς καρδίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων qualifies ἐκπορεύονται.
    - The adverb ἔσωθεν qualifies ἐκπορεύονται. Sin comes “from within.”
    - ἔσωθεν is more general than ἐκ τῆς καρδίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Yet both function adverbially to qualify ἐκπορεύονται.
  - Sinful volitions arise from an underlying “character,” “habitus,” or dispositional complex.
- Consequences for the Libertarian Conception of Free Will
  - If these arguments are true, then two consequences follow for libertarianism:
    - The will does not operate independently of the heart or dispositional complex.
    - The will of the natural man does not possess the power of contrary choice when it comes to either pleasing or displeasing God.
  - That’s not to say that fallen man has *no* choice. According to Murray, fallen man retains is the power of *alternative* choice.
    - This is the choice among various sinful ethical options. Yet, he does not have the power of contrary choice, which would allow him to choose equally between righteous and sinful options.

- This means that fallen man retains moral ability, but he has lost moral excellency. He still makes moral choices for which he is responsible, but he cannot please God in his sinful condition.
- Summary
  - Scripture does not teach that free will operates independently of God’s decree or human nature (i.e. the *habitus*).
  - If it is ethically impossible for the natural man to obey or please God, then the natural man does not possess libertarian freedom.
  - If the dispositional complex determines the volitions of the moral agent, then his will does not operate independently of his nature or character.
  - Finally, libertarian freedom destroys the possibility of a confirmed state of righteousness for the believer. In the libertarian view, he must always have the freedom to sin.<sup>3</sup>

## REFORMED THEOLOGY AND FREE AGENCY

- A Confessional, Redemptive-Historical Perspective
  - Three Forms of Unity
    - Belgic Confession, Article 14
    - Canons of Dort, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Articles 3–4
    - Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 3, Q. 8; Lord’s Day 4, Q. 9
  - Chapter 9 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, offers a redemptive-historical perspective on free agency.
    - Free will/agency is set in four covenantal and anthropological *categories*.
    - This helps us remember that free will is not an abstract metaphysical concept. It is a concrete covenant-historical reality conditions by creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.
  - After making the distinction we have made between moral agency and moral excellence, WCF 9:2–5 speaks of four states in which moral agency can operate: the states of innocency, sin, grace, and glory.
    - Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; (Eccl 7:29; Gen 1:26) but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it. (Gen 2:16–17; 3:6).
      - In this estate, Adam possessed the ability to sin and the ability not to sin. He could either consummate in heavenly glory or eternal damnation.
      - *Posse peccare; posse non peccare*.
    - Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: (Rom 5:6; Rom 8:7; John 15:5) so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, (Rom 3:10, 12) and dead in

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<sup>3</sup> “Scripture teaches that in heaven, the consummate state of human existence, we will not be free to sin. So the highest state of human existence will be a state without libertarian freedom.” Frame, *No Other God*, 125.

sin, (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13) is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto (John 6:44, 65; Eph 2:2–5; 1 Cor 2:14; Titus 3:3–5).

- In the estate of sin and misery, the unbeliever is not able not to sin. In other words, he can only sin. Sin is his only ethical activity.
- While the unbeliever possesses moral agency, he has totally lost moral excellence or conformity.
- *Non posse non peccare.*
- When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, He freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; (Col 1:13, John 8:34, 36) and, by His grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; (Phil 2:13; Rom 6:18, 22) yet so, that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil. (Gal 5:17; Rom 7:15, 18–19, 21, 23)
  - In the estate of grace, the believer is once again able either able to sin or able not to sin.
  - *Posse peccare; posse non peccare.*
- The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to do good alone in the state of glory only. (Eph 4:13; Heb 12:23; 1 John 3:2; Jude 24)
  - In the estate of glory will confirmed in righteousness. He will not be able to sin.
  - *Non posse peccare.*
- If we reject libertarian free will, how can we speak positively of man’s freedom according to Scripture’s testimony?
- Compatibilist Freedom
  - Murray writes, “A man is responsible for his acts because they are due to his volitions. He is responsible for his volitions because they are self-propelled, exercised without compulsion and express of what he is in the innermost bent, bias, and disposition of heart and mind.”<sup>4</sup>
  - As such, free moral agency is *compatible* with both the eternal decree and self-determinate actions, which are based on the orientation of the heart.
  - We are free to act always in accord with our nature, but we are not free as natural man to please God.
    - In order to please God, one must be regenerated: being raised from the dead and given a new heart. They must have their minds enlightened and their wills renewed.
    - This is a sovereign act of God.
    - Romans 9:16—“So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Vol. 2, 63.