

## **God's Power and Human Freedom: Indicative Meets Imperative**

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I will read passages from the Scriptures of the three main monotheisms, and ask you to decide, in these passages, “who is doing what to whom (or, perhaps, with whom)?”

*From Exodus 9:27-10:1* (This takes place during the plagues, and Egypt is being hit with hail the size that hit Northfield a few years ago. Quiz: who hardened Pharaoh's heart?)

Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, “This time I have sinned, the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Pray to the LORD! Enough of God's thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer.” Moses said to him, “As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to the LORD; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is the LORD's. But as for you and your officials, I know that you do not yet fear the LORD God.” ... So Moses left Pharaoh, went out of the city, and stretched out his hands to the LORD; then the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured down on the earth. But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials. So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the LORD has spoken through Moses. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them....

*From The Qur'an, Surah 2: 6 and 26*

As for those who disbelieve, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered....He makes many go astray and leads many to the right path. But it is only the rebels He makes go astray....

*From the letter of St Paul to the Philippians, 2:12-13*

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Well, we can be forgiven for being a bit confused. It seems that in these three monotheisms there's a contradiction or, at least, a tension between whether humans are or God is responsible for our sins or our salvation. In Exodus, part of the tension is due to the different sources, different writers; the J source, the Yawest, pins the hardening of his heart on Pharaoh himself, while the D source, the Deuteronomist, attributes it to God. But the final editor saw fit to include both claims and even included the neutral one of "Pharaoh's heart was hardened," sort of like our responsibility-evading phrase, "Mistakes were made."

Of course, it's not only monotheism that has this tension: readers of the classics, of Homer and Sophocles, for example, are constantly asked to consider whether the heroes are the masters of their fate or are the playthings of the gods. And to consider whether even the gods are subject to a higher necessity, a hardness of sheer causality that determines our fate. Indeed, once we mention determinism we recognize that a completely secular outlook cannot escape a similar problem, the problem of whether and how human freedom and responsibility can exist in a universe of blind matter in relentless motion. Even if indeterminacy at the quantum level percolates up to our visible level, it's not at all clear that sheer chance happenings can help us claim responsibility for our decisions. Let's admit that many, perhaps most of our actions are done rather automatically, without much thought. The question is, when we do take the time to deliberate, does having mother nature flip a quantum coin for us help us to claim more responsibility than sheer determinism allows. Now, most naturalistic philosophers are what we call compatibilists, asserting that determinism is compatible with human responsibility because causality does not *bypass* our cognitive and volitional capacities, it *uses* them. As long as we are doing what we decide to do, perhaps after

careful deliberation, we are responsible for what we do, especially if the decision flows from the character traits and values with which we closely identify. Indeed, this view has real affinities with one plausible way of interpreting the Exodus and Qur'an passages: God is simply using the obstinate will of Pharaoh or unbelievers to determine the result; they still are the ones who are obstinate or rebellious, even if it is God who is making them so.

Of course, to others this sounds a bit like the freedom of the thermostat: it is not bypassed when the furnace is turned off or on, but its "decision" is programmed by others. So what if it is Pharaoh's will or heart that channels the decision; if nature or God is at work in him such that he cannot do otherwise, it seems unfair to hold him responsible. Thus the exegetical debates parallel the philosophical ones. Here's a rough and ready argument that any human responsibility (in a stronger sense than what compatibilism allows) is philosophically impossible and theologically idolatrous: To be really responsible for your actions you must base your actions on something in you that you are responsible for. If your actions flow from something in you that was not up to you, you are simply carrying out decisions that were set by something else. But whenever you made your *first* deliberative decision, by definition it could not have been based on something that you were responsible for; it was the result of heredity and early experience. And all subsequent decisions were based on heredity and experience plus the results of earlier decisions that themselves were based on heredity and experience. In fact, we cannot be really responsible for our actions unless at some point we are the cause of ourselves. But that's to put ourselves in the place of God, and we know better than to go *there*.

I'm not endorsing this argument, but refuting it is harder than you might think. In fact, some of its force is behind the move to theological determinism—that God controls everything, even our wills. Now I was raised a theological determinist; our small Calvinist denomination was adamant about asserting double predestination, that God controls absolutely everything and therefore God

decided the eternal fate of both the elect and the damned before they were even conceived. There are some dramatic passages in Paul's letter to Romans, about how God loved Jacob and hated Esau even before they were born, and about how pots made for destruction have no right to complain to the potter, who has the right to do as he pleases with his creations. Even if that were true about pots (which is doubtful—may even the artist wantonly destroy beautiful art without any reason? Legally, yes, but morally?), people aren't pots. Parents may not treat their infants destructively, and much of the poignant moral tension in Mary Shelley's famous novel flows from how Frankenstein mistreats, indeed misnames, his own creature. Even so, these passages, interpreted with relentless logic, were used to preach double predestination—salvation and damnation were distributed without merit or demerit. Of course, this sort of harsh divine determinism flirts with making God the source of sin, more like a moral monster than the awesomely holy, merciful, just, and worthy-of-worship Supreme Being that we praised in our opening hymn. Although it is distasteful to me now, I still think that theological determinism has some powerful logic on its side—I mean, is the Supreme Being completely in charge or not? I confess that, for better or worse, such questions pulled me into philosophy where, of course, we enjoy hard questions more than easy answers. This brings up an important part of the history of the college from which I just retired, St Olaf. For its first three years, 1875-78, St Olaf was mainly a co-ed preparatory school; in fact, as some of you may know, it was located in two former Northfield Public school buildings right in this very location—including our parking lot. Now a crucial factor in St Olaf's becoming a four-year college, and was that the logical Calvinist views on predestination were taking hold at the Lutheran Seminary in Missouri, and the founders of St Olaf—Muus, Mohn, Kildahl, and others—formed "The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood," which in 1886 started a seminary at St Olaf (which then needed a four-year college), which meanwhile had moved to our dear old hill. The curriculum was designed to teach a robust sense of human responsibility. So the Lutherans at St Olaf can thank us Calvinists for

causing the religious ruckus that in turn was one of the causes of their being there today. Not that we could accept any credit and still be consistent determinists.

Which, of course, underscores a problem: not even determinists can sit around and wait to see where fate will push them. We are agents that live our lives in forward gear, and not just spectators of our lives, looking at what is happening or what has happened, daily singing *que sera sera*. So let's say that you appreciate the arguments for determinism but also appreciate the need for taking responsibility for your life. In fact, let's say you lean in both directions but get a bit dizzy when you shift from one to the other. Here's another rough and ready argument, this one for those who aren't sure what to believe about free will and determinism. It actually comes from the doctoral dissertation and a subsequent article by my Carleton colleague David Sipfle (who would be quite surprised if he knew he was being favorably quoted from the pulpit). Let's notice that your free will either does or does not exist, and that you either do or do not believe that it does. Then there are four possible combinations: Suppose you deny free will and, in fact, there is none; then your belief is mapping reality all right, but no credit to you—you were merely determined to believe it. Now suppose you assert free will and, in fact, there is none; then you fail to map reality but no shame on you—you were determined to believe it. Now suppose you deny free will and, in fact, it exists; then you have not only failed to map reality, but shame on you—you could have gotten it right but you got it wrong. Now suppose you assert free will and, in fact, you are right; then two good things follow—you have mapped reality correctly and, to your credit; you could have gotten it wrong but you got it right. So insofar as you are uncertain, and insofar as you can try to control your beliefs, you should try to believe in your own freedom and responsibility, at least concerning your deliberative decisions.

Of course, you can't just grit your teeth and directly decide what to believe; convictions about such matters are what you have to *find* yourself believing, because of the evidence. But you

can have some indirect control over what you believe; in particular, you can live *as if* something is true and, if you made the right leap of faith, you may well notice evidence that confirms it. I will be the first to admit that there are some dangers with this type of leap, but I actually think it is appropriate on this issue and, what's more, I think it is what St Paul is urging us in Philippians. He asserts the imperative that we should work out our own salvation; we should take charge as agents and accept responsibility for our own decisions. Of course, accepting responsibility for something as important as your own destiny can elicit some anxiety, even some fear and trembling. So Paul immediately balances the imperative with the indicative: God is in you, enabling your work. The words "work" in both clauses have the same Greek root, so Paul seems to say that we have to do the work of *willing* and *doing* at the same time that God *enables* us to will and to do what God wills us to do. So I think Paul is teaching what is called "the two aspect" view of freedom and determinism. From our *agent* point of view, we must take charge of our lives. But we can also stand back and reflect on our lives, and from this *spectator* point of view we can see that much of what we would like to take credit for is actually due to amazing grace or, in secular terms, the result of being gifted with a healthy genetic endowment and a helpful early environment. I think most of you would be the first to agree that your achievements involved the contributions of many others. The late and great philosopher John Rawls argued that none of us deserve the personal talents with which we were born, or deserve the character traits that were nurtured in us as children. He called this "the natural lottery." All honor to those of you who bootstrapped yourselves out of an unfortunate genetic endowment or self-helped your rise above a lousy upbringing, but most of us have to admit that our gifts and even the gumption we have to use them well are more luck than pluck, and more grace than works. Much as we would like to *earn* our rewards, we have to admit that much has been given, maybe even everything.

An alternative to thinking that, from the stand-back point of view, everything has been given to us is to wonder about what St Paul calls the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; how does it allow for cooperation or sharing between God and humans? This sort of synergistic thinking is thought by some to be heresy, but I don't call it that; I think it is analogous to interesting proposals from cognitive research about how the mind and the brain might interact and work together. However, I do note that Paul and much of Scripture seem to claim *both* that we are responsible for what we do *and* that it is God working in us that enables us to do it. Rather than a harmonious *division* of labor, he seems to assert that there are two points of view or models that, on the surface, seem to contradict—like the wave and particle models of light—but both of which must be affirmed. We can *hope* that there is some mysterious reconciliation in the murkier depths of physics or metaphysics, but we have no knowledge of it.

Meanwhile, with St Paul we accept both the imperative to work and the indicative that we are worked on and in. We are workers who are pieces of work; we are creatures who are creators; we are products with roots and producers with wings. As we said earlier in our invocation, we are on our own journeys, while in the transforming presence of the Holy One. But, I hear you ask, if in the stand-back mode we see that God's or nature's gifts explain our proud achievements, then what about our shameful screw-ups? Maybe our dark side and the hardening of our hearts also have explanations that excuse us. This, of course, is what hard-nosed determinists like Clarence Darrow actually argue. And I admit that there is a pleasing symmetry in the folk wisdom that says we should not let our victories go to our heads nor our defeats to our hearts. And what a handy excuse for theological determinists: topping Flip Wilson's Geraldine's saying, "The devil made me do it," we could say, perhaps with Pharaoh, "God made me do it." I remember raising this point with my dad once when I was caught doing something wrong—I was a budding Calvinist theologian trying

out the angles. He said, “Well, God is also making me punish you.” There’s a reason that one of the most famous debates about predestination is in hell, among the devils in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Which brings us to the fact that there seems to be an asymmetry in the appropriateness of standing back and seeing reasons for gratitude, on the one hand, and searching for excuses, on the other. The mentality of “Gee officer Krupke, we are depraved because we were deprived” is too easily abused. To be sure, we sometimes are too hard on ourselves and others because we ignore mitigating circumstances. Thus it is sometimes appropriate to stand back and notice some explanations that excuse. But St Paul’s advice throughout his letters is that when we are contemplating our sins and miseries we should not linger long in the spectator mode; we should move quickly to the agent mode. As one of my grade school teachers would say, sometimes rather *too* quickly, “Stop moping and start coping.” For example, in our agent mode, we can often appropriately seek repentance and forgiveness. Even old Pharaoh in our text came close to that.

The upshot is that there are deep theological, philosophical, and existential issues here, and an apparent paradox. The resolution that St Paul provides is not a theoretical one of how to figure it out; it is a richly practical one of affirming both a personal imperative and a theological indicative in the hope that we can see God’s will and work in our own willing and in our own working, in our caring and our sharing. And now, you will be glad to know, I chose to say Amen.

**Hymn:** In the just reward of labor, God's will is done.

In the help we give our neighbor, God's will is done.

In our worldwide task of caring for the hungry and despairing,

in the harvests we are sharing, God's will is done.